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THE YOUNG SHOWMAN'S RIVALS



“‘I want a pledge from you. Will you give it?’ repeated our hero.”
(See page 50)

THE YOUNG SHOWMAN'S RIVALS

Ups and Downs of the Road

BY ✓

STANLEY NORRIS

AUTHOR OF

"Phil, the Showman," "The Young Showman's Pluck,"
and "The Young Showman's Triumph."

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The Young Showman's Rivals

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AMERICAN

SHOWMAN

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THE YOUNG SHOWMAN'S RIVALS.

CHAPTER I.

THE TWO-TENT RIVAL.

"Rush, we've got a nasty piece of business to deal with this time."

It was Walt Arkwright, general all-around man, who spoke, and he addressed his former schoolmate and present employer, Philip Rushington, usually styled "Rush," sole owner and manager of Mossman & Rushington's Circus and Hippodrome.

The circus had been on the road for several months, and as readers of a former volume in this series, entitled "Phil Rushington's Circus," know, it had proved a big success in spite of many obstacles.

"What is wrong now, Walt?" returned Phil, with a quiet smile that partly belied the serious concern he felt. "Your face looks as if it was getting ready to show at a funeral."

"To begin with, three shows are billed for this town all for the same day—all of the circus kind at that!"

"What is the meaning of that? Did Mr. Carpenter, our advance agent, engage grounds and put up paper for a date without finding out if there was anybody ahead of us?"

"It isn't likely that he would do that. Of course, I don't know, only that no man would do such a thing if he was in his right mind."

"Upon one occasion, at least, as you know, Norman Carpenter did a very important thing when he was not in his right mind. But then there was more excuse for it. In this case, he must have been worse than an idiot if he has run us in on the heels of two other circuses. Why, in the mere matter of grounds, I was told that there was only one place in this town where our tents could be put up. Now, Carpenter had to engage that spot for us. If he engaged it, how could anybody else get hold of it?"

"The question is a poser, Rush. But I saw the paper of the other shows with my own eyes, and they all name the same grounds for the exhibition."

"Have the other circuses arrived ahead of us?"

"I don't know. One, which is a new show, and which is said to be modeled after the Mossman & Rushington, was coming from a small town to the south of this, and it was to be drawn with horses. When they will arrive, if they are not already here, is a matter of conjecture."

"Then there must not be a moment of time lost. We must get onto the grounds with our property, and if they are not already occupied, the sooner our tents are up the better will our chances be. Well, Walt, won't there be more than one kind of a circus if all should get to the grounds at the same time!"

"I should be inclined to smile," said Arkwright.

The hour at which this conversation took place was a little past four o'clock in the morning. It was light

enough for midday. The eastern sky was flushed to a crimson hue, for the sun was just below the horizon; and in the west hung the moon, round as an orange and of the hue of one as it shone through a smooch of smoke left by a passing railway train.

Phil Rushington was mounted on the magnificent horse which he rode so gracefully in the ring of his own circus, and he had been galloping along a strip of country road when he met Walt Arkwright, his chum and assistant manager of the Mossman & Rushington Circus and Hippodrome.

Rushington had just reached the crest of a low rise of ground from whence he could see a broad, beautiful valley with a stream zigzagging through alternating patches of woodland and grassy plain, and at one point dividing a considerable town into halves.

Phil had tarried at the station to see that the work of unloading the circus property and getting it started for the grounds was well under way, while Walt had gone down to the town in advance to "spy out the land."

Before going far Walt had come upon billboards bearing the announcements not only of the Mossman & Rushington, but of two other similar shows, all to exhibit in that town on the same date. More than this he did not stop to see, for he felt that Rushington could not be informed of the conditions too soon.

Early as the hour was, Walt had seen a boy by the roadside waiting to see the show come along. From him he had obtained the only points concerning the other shows which were not mentioned by the bills. Back

up the road Arkwright had hastened, to meet Rushington as has been described.

Even then they heard the heavy rumble of the property teams of the Rushington circus. They had just finished loading, and were already on their way to the grounds from the station, and not far behind Phil himself.

"Right about face, Walt, and we will get to the grounds as quick as our nags will let us," said the young circus owner.

"And if representatives of either of the other shows are on the ground?"

"We'll make 'em suspend operations until we can communicate with the agent of whom the grounds were hired. Then, woe unto him whose hour of making the engagement is the latest. And woe unto the agent, no matter who is the winner."

Walt wheeled his horse, and the two thundered down the road as if they were going to a fire. They presently came to the billboards of which Walt had spoken, and there Phil tarried long enough to make sure that his friend had made no mistake as to the date or other significance conveyed by the bills.

"You were right," said Phil, smiling grimly. "There are three shows in this town to-day, unless one cleans the others out. It may come to that. I'm blessed if I feel now as if I were going to meekly give up the day that I have scheduled and the grounds I have hired, to say nothing of the license fee that I paid to the town for the privilege of entertaining its people. No, Walt, I don't think the Mossman & Rushington will cancel any dates!"

Forward sped the two young horsemen, leaving a cloud of dust behind them. Early risers in the houses which were scattered along the route flew to the windows to get a glimpse of the two riders and their magnificent horses as they passed.

Rushington was especially careful about the appearance and quality of his horses. The draught animals were sleek and well fed and carefully groomed. No misdemeanor on the part of people connected with his circus was counted by him so serious as neglect in the care of the horses.

There was no chance to talk as they rode down the gentle slope toward the heart of the town. Both knew that the circus grounds were at that end of the town, and the exact location was indicated by a large signboard, for the spot was used by the county fairs each fall.

There was an open gateway, a broad, hard track, a high board fence, and within the inclosure were three men, one of them giving directions to two others who were driving some short stakes.

"Those are not our men," said Phil, as he pulled up just inside the gate.

"None of our men are on the ground yet," Walt answered.

"Then these fellows probably belong to one of the other shows, and they are staking the spot for the canvasmen to put up the tent."

"That is probably the situation. Now, Rush, what had we better do about it? We may talk as much as we choose about taking possession of the grounds whether

we are entitled to them or not, but when it comes right down to it we don't want to get into a row unless we are dead sure of coming out on top."

"Who said anything about taking possession if we were not entitled to the grounds? We are entitled to them, and I have the document to prove it. Of course I mean to be courteous, and put up our canvas peaceably if I can. But it goes up anyhow, Walt."

Phil wheeled his horse into the track and rode up to the spot where the foreman of the trio was standing.

"These are the Edmunton Fair Grounds, I believe?" Phil inquired, politely.

The man was a stalwart fellow, with a red face, a red nose and red eyes. He wore a blazing red tie, and he was wiping perspiration from his face with a red handkerchief. The whole effect was lurid, and Walt, who had an eye for such points, smiled to himself.

"Course they are," snapped the man.

"And you are the agent who looks after them and lets them, I presume? Mr. Garno?"

"No! I'm Dan Starr, head property man of Tandy's Two-Tent Wonder. We're staking out to put up the tents. Canvas be here inside of ten minutes."

Phil Rushington exchanged glances with his assistant.

Walt's heart beat fast, for he foresaw a conflict of rights, and the red man did not look submissive or amenable to argument. But Phil's coolness did not waver.

"There must be some mistake about this, Mr. Starr," he said, quietly producing a paper. "This shows that these grounds were hired for this date by the Mossman

& Rushington Circus and Hippodrome. Mr. Abel Garno, who is empowered, I believe, to negotiate with traveling shows for the letting of the fair grounds, signed the paper. Probably the advance agent of your company engaged other grounds, and telegraphed wrong instructions to your manager."

The red-faced man grew redder while Phil was speaking, and it was evident that he could hardly restrain himself from breaking in before Phil had finished.

"There, you've said enough!" he roared, at last. "I know what I'm doing, and I don't let no boys come around and give me any guff. Get out of here, both of ye!"

Rushington did not stir.

"Do you claim that the Tandy Two-Tent Wonder has engaged these grounds?" Phil demanded.

"We wouldn't be putting up our canvas here if it hadn't."

"Then you have a paper to show for it?"

"The manager has it."

"It isn't here, then?"

"What did I want of a piece of paper? We don't do an exclusive business on paper, like some single-tent shows, you better believe."

"We do not need to enter into any discussion of the respective merits of the two shows. Mine will utter its first word for itself in the street parade within a few hours. But having hired these grounds, and holding proof of the fact, I must request you to drive no more stakes for my men to pull up!"

"To pull up, eh?"

"That is what I said."

"You don't dare to touch one of them stakes! You blamed little understrapper, to blow for a one-hoss racin' show, with a single tent no bigger than a gypsy's, and nothin' but Kickapoo Injun patent medicine acks! That's what you be. Git off the earth!—git off, I say!"

The man blustered up to Rushington's horse. He had a short stake in his hand like those which his men were driving, and seemed about to strike the noble horse with it across the face.

"Hold on, Mr. Starr! Don't you strike my horse!"

Phil spoke in a tone that caused the other to hesitate.

"Who says it? Git off, if you don't want your hoss hit."

"I am Mr. Philip Rushington, of the Mossman & Rushington Circus and Hippodrome!"

The other stared, grinned incredulously.

"I tell you and the other youngster to git outer these grounds or I'll smash the noses of your hosses first and your'n second!"

The stake was swung, and Rushington reined his horse to one side to avoid the blow.

CHAPTER II.

TAKING POSSESSION.

In reining his horse to one side it was not Phil Rushington's object solely to avoid letting the stake hit the nose of his steed. He at the moment heard the rumble of heavy wagons along the road, and the sounds came from opposite directions. He knew the meaning of them—that the property wagons of his own show were approaching from the depot, and those of Tandy's Two-Tent Wonder were coming through the town.

Phil would gladly have avoided trouble if it were possible. But Dan Starr, of the other company, was a natural fighter. He would rather quarrel than enjoy any other felicity in life. There are men of his sort, as Rushington knew by experience, and with that sort there is only one way to deal.

The stake swung past the nose of Rushington's horse, and at the same time the rider deftly seized and jerked it from the man's grasp.

A growl of rage broke from Starr's lips. For a moment he stared at the young showman as if he could not believe the evidence of his senses. Then he leaped toward him, with the evident purpose of dragging him from the saddle.

"Take care of Cæsar, Walt," said Phil, coolly, as he reined the steed up to his companion, and then leaped lightly to the ground and faced his assailant.

"I never allow a horse to be abused, Mr. Starr," he calmly remarked, as he met the savage gaze of Starr. "But if you wish to vent your viciousness on me I will give you as fair a chance as I would anybody. So let the agent of Tandy's Two-Cent Thunder sail in and win!"

The two workmen had so far listened to the altercation between Starr and Phil with interest, but without anticipation of serious trouble. Now they approached nearer to their boss, as if ready to render any aid that might be required of them.

But the remark of Rushington brought a laugh from Walt Arkwright, and that helped them to see the wit in it, and both broke into a roar.

"'Tandy's Two-Cent Thunder!' Good enough!" cried one of them. And both looked at the genteel young owner of the rival show with new interest.

"Yah!" howled Starr, to whom the contemptuous name applied to the show he represented was the most odious that could have been devised. He glared at his men for laughing, and then his heavy bulk lunged toward Rushington, while he yelled:

"Get off the grounds! Get off, or I'll smash every bone in ye!"

His heavy fists hammered at the head of Phil furiously for half a minute before he realized that he was doing no execution whatever, and that he was tiring himself out to no purpose.

"Hah! a fighter, and scientific, be ye!" he snarled.

He drew back to survey his antagonist more critically.

It dawned upon his slow wits then that the young fellow would not stand there like that unless he had some reason to believe that he could take care of himself.

"Perhaps I better go in more careful, and knock him out with one good straight, smashing hit!" he thought.

Walt looked on with a faint smile of amusement, for he was not worried as to how his chum might come out of the row. His chief worry was about the final outcome, which an encounter of fists alone might not settle.

Phil Rushington, a year or two before, had shown that he had a bad temper if he gave rein to it. He well understood the fact, and he kept that temper curbed upon all occasions. Each year found him better able to control himself; each year, with its discipline and experience, its hardships and triumphs, brought to him more of wisdom and power to use it.

Yet the young circus owner was a boy still, and it was not quite possible for him to keep his heart throbs down to the regularity and moderation of a man's. The heavy fists of the ruffian hammered on Rushington's arms, and although the head and body of the young athlete were amply protected, his arms and hands felt the weight of some of the blows, and it was getting to be an unpleasant monotony.

The encounter took place just inside the gate of the grounds. Phil, indeed, stood backed up almost against the high fence.

"Throw him over the fence, Starr, can't ye?" said one of the other men, who began to think that the big fellow

was letting the youth thrash him without trying to put up much of a fight.

"Yes, Starr, throw the young bantam over the fence," the other joined in.

"That is the scheme, Starr," chimed in Walt. "It is a neat trick to do by Phil Rushington, if you only know how to come it."

Walt Arkwright was believed by most of his friends to be rather effeminate in his choice of amusements. But there was one masculine capability that he admired—the ability to fight.

He had seen Rushington in that sort of a game before, and he always forgot everything else watching the easy grace of movement and marvelous strength exhibited by his chum in an encounter of that kind.

Starr was getting tired of trying to get in a telling blow with his fists, and while the arms of our hero ached like an ugly tooth, he was tiring out his assailant without having actually struck a blow in return.

But suddenly the tactics of Phil changed.

"I hoped you would drop it without asking for any more!" Phil exclaimed. "But I guess you don't know enough!"

Thump! went one of Rushington's fists against the shoulder of Starr, and the man reeled. He recovered himself instantly, but his discretion was knocked out of him by the hurt of the blow, and he flung himself at Phil in an attempt to crush the latter by the sheer force of weight and strength.

As a result, he received Phil's fist again, landed with

uncomfortable precision, and back he went against the fence. Then Rushington did not wait for the man to return to the onslaught. Instead, he sprang at Starr before the latter could recover himself, and caught him around the waist partly from behind, lifting him off his feet.

The man was helpless. No man can make a commendable show of valor with his feet kicking the empty air, while he is being swung in the arms of an antagonist like a pendulum.

Starr yelled, the two laborers shouted and stared, Walt Arkwright smiled expectantly, and the end of it was that Starr went over the fence, dropping on the turf on the other side!

"Ginger! but that was done pretty good!" gasped one of the men. The other could not find words to express his surprise and admiration for the valor of Rushington, who was breathing deep and strong under the exertion, for Starr was no lightweight.

It was Walt who spoke to the men.

"We didn't come to make trouble," he said. "We have our paper to prove that we hired these grounds of Mr. Garno, and a receipt for payment which was made in advance. Your man Starr pitched in and tried to drive Mr. Rushington off without giving him a chance to prove his rights. Gentlemen don't settle differences that way. Lucky that Rushington didn't hit the lubber between the eyes, as he might have done, for it would have used him up. Better go and reason some sense into him. There come our property wagons, and we'll have this spot cov-

ered in with canvas in short order. If your people prove a prior engagement of the grounds we'll loan you our tents for your two-cent thunder!"

"All right," laughed the laborer who had been the most admiring observer of the encounter. "We was hired by Starr to-day, and we don't know anything about him or the circus that he blows for. We've heard of yours, and Mr. Rushington seems to be all right. No hard feelings between us on either side, I hope?"

"We have none," said Walt.

"I guess we'll be getting out of the way. I wish we might settle up with Tandy and you wanted a couple of men like us. We've been wanting to get in with a show of this kind for two years, and Tandy was the first one to come along, and he was just organizing, so we got in easy—too easy. He owes us about ten cents, but we want to be fair about leaving him. If he wants us bad for the day we'll have to stick. Then, if your people had a vacancy——"

"I don't know about that, really," said Walt, as the first of Rushington's property wagons rumbled into the grounds. "But if you still want a job, come around in an hour or two and the boss of the canvasmen will tell you."

"And will you speak to him about us?"

"Yes."

The men edged out of the grounds, and Phil and Walt well understood that they would not present themselves to Tandy's boss for duty on that day or any other. The fact that they had laughed when the show that hired them was called Tandy's Two-Cent Thunder was enough to

brew for them the most serious kind of trouble with the management of the other show should they wish to retain an engagement with it.

Phil Rushington had disposed of Starr, the boss of the canvasmen of the other show, in such short order that he could himself hardly realize the importance of the result accomplished. He had not sought the fight. There had been a time—and that time was not very distant—when the knowledge that he possessed a strength of arm which was really abnormal, tempted him to exhibit that strength upon every provocation.

But he no longer prided himself on his prowess. He shrank more and more from giving an exhibition of his strength in unfriendly encounters. To him, there seemed to be a strength of mind and character which was more to be coveted and cherished than mere power of muscle. It seemed to him that the possession of the ability to overcome almost any assailant drew him into encounters which he might have avoided had he been less confident of success.

Yet he might have known that this was not so. He never thought of the outcome when he stood up to resist an assailant or to assert a right or defend a friend. Had he been puny in body, or had he been attacked by overwhelming odds, he would have been just as ready to stay in the battle.

In reality, therefore, it was strength of mind and character in Phil Rushington that won, even when he had to hammer the head of an obstinate boor with his fists. His reluctance to make use of his great strength caused him

to consider his action well beforehand, so that he was sure that justice was on his side before a blow was struck.

The first of the property wagons of Rushington's circus came in through the gate, and the second was close behind it. The others were further in the rear, and Rush saw the wagons of the rival circus already at the gate.

Those wagons halted just outside, and the burly form of Starr was seen to approach the foremost team. There was a brief consultation, and the driver went back to speak to the drivers of the other wagons. On one of the latter several men reclined on the canvas, seemingly half asleep.

"Walt," said Phil, in a low tone, "if those teams and men come in here, there will be the worst kind of trouble."

CHAPTER III.

BLOCKING THE WAY.

Walt Arkwright had one of the most sensitive natures in the world, and a naturally mild temper. Yet when he had first known Phil Rushington at Springvale Academy, he had seemed to enjoy sport or more serious encounters quite as well as did any other student in the school.

He was not inclined to get mixed up in anything of the sort as a principal. But he liked to look on and to "rub the ears" of the combatants.

So much for his character before he really attempted to face any of the serious affairs of life. At first our hero had feared that his chum would be of little practical use to him in connection with a circus. Yet, almost from the start, Walt had acted in a *rôle* that called for the most sturdy self-reliance and force of character. And when it came to standing up for the rights of the show, in opposition to any kind of annoyance, no one could have been more invincible than the mild-mannered Walt.

So it was when Phil spoke of the prospect of trouble with the men of the rival show which at that moment was approaching the gate of the same grounds on which they were about to set up their tents. He took the matter as calmly as though it were the announcement of a picnic.

"I suppose," he said, "it would be easier to keep them out than to put them out if they once got in. We don't let people go into our tent unless they have a ticket, and

I don't know as we are obliged to allow any of that crowd to trespass on these grounds before the show begins."

"There are two sides to the first part of your proposition, Walt," said Phil.

"How is that?"

"We have a right to throw the fellows out as fast as they come in, if we keep on this side of the fence ourselves when we are doing it. But if they make us trouble from the outside we can do little without the help of the police. That, in fact, is what we need to secure at the start, so as to have the law on our side."

"Let's have the police, then. If it is merely a few policemen that we need to make us happy, we ought to buy some and carry them around with us as a part of our show," laughed Walt.

"What I am afraid of in this town is, that it is rather poorly provided with policemen in the first place, and that we will have to rely on ourselves for the defense of our rights, although you may be sure that there will be enough to stand in the way of our doing anything very square. In towns of this size there are always people who are willing to believe any kind of a yarn against circus people, and some think circuses are made up of gangs of ruffians at the best, instead of being composed, as they are, of some of the most steady, temperate and industrious people in the world. We have prejudice to fight against in case of trouble that may involve individuals belonging to the town."

"That's right, Rush. But we are ready to fight prejudice or any other old thing, aren't we?"

"Every time, Walt. Here comes our boss of canvasmen. Let me give him his orders. The sooner we can get up our canvas the better it will be for us, for 'possession is nine points of the law,' in a case of this kind as in any other."

The consultation with the sturdy Irishman who had charge of the canvasmen was brief, but to the point, and never had that energetic gang set to work under better discipline or with greater effectiveness than it did then.

So far, the teams of the other show had not attempted to pass in at the gate. At this Rushington wondered not a little.

He did not wish to invite a fight, therefore he had kept away from the entrance gate himself. He had one man stationed near it, however, that any action might be reported to him without delay. The hour was too early to do any business with the officials of the town, or to see the agent of the grounds at his office.

"But our only recourse in the interest of peace is to see the agent as early as possible, and throw the settlement of the question of our claims and those of the rival show on to his shoulders, where it belongs, since the blunder, if there is one, is probably his."

"How could there be any blunder?" queried Walt.

"I don't know, unless the business is done by more than one man, and one of them was unaware of the engagements made by the other."

"Probably that is the way it occurred if there is really any blunder instead of design. But I have a suspicion of something else."

"What is that, Walt?"

"Haven't we been followed up by some kind of underhanded bother from the very first? Has there been a town visited by us where we haven't been annoyed by some secret enemy? Have we yet found out who was responsible for the escape of the lion in the city of Columbus?"

"I know that is still a mystery, except that the trainer thought one of the young fellows who were hanging around the cage may have meddled with the fastening in some way."

"A pretty thin explanation, to my mind."

"The trainer gave that, as I believed, to shift from his own shoulders the real responsibility for the accident."

"However it happened, there is a mystery in it, and it is only one of several things that have occurred to cause you trouble and expense. You know that Joseph Saunders, as the agent for another circus, tried while we were in that place to hire Isabel, your star rider. Then, before you got out of the dramatic profession the same man wheedled your manager into investing your money in a wildcat scheme. There has been something of the kind everywhere you have been, and there begins to appear to me the ghost of a meaning to it all."

"You have been my private detective, Walt, and I will have to leave it to you to find out about such things. But I hate to feel that I am one of the sort to make a world full of enemies who are ready to do me all the mischief they can."

"Now, Rush, you aren't talking with your usual clear sense."

"What do you mean?"

"Are you friendless in this old world?"

"I hope not, Walt."

"Isn't it true that you were the most popular man in Springvale Academy, and didn't you receive the warmest kind of a reception there when you visited the place recently with your show?"

"Yes. But even there I had to be assailed by an enemy who would have made me no end of trouble if I hadn't been on the watch."

"Just one enemy, and you know his sort. It is the same kind that a fellow like you is bound to make. And yet you turn most of them your way in the end, because you are so ready to forgive and to use them right in everything. You were a winner in athletics, and you win in everything you undertake, and a winner finds people who will hate him for no other reason than that he does win. But don't you see that the sort of enemies you have is the kind it is better to have against you rather than for you?"

"Some may figure it that way. I know what you mean, Walt, and I thank you for your kind way of putting it. Still, you are mistaken on one point."

"Glad it is only one. But what is it?"

"It isn't good to have an enemy of any kind, though it may not be possible to help making one now and then. I don't believe there is any man that would hate me if I could get close enough to him so that he might know

how I really felt toward him. I feel ugly sometimes, when somebody has tried in a mean way to throw me down, but I can't harbor things against a man."

"You are the best fellow living, Rush, and don't I know it!"

"Don't, Walt, though I was on the point of saying the same thing of you. Say, old man, isn't it good to have a friend that you feel is always sure, no matter what may turn against one?"

"Yes. And I have such a friend in you, and you the same kind in me, no matter what bluffs we may put up on each other at times."

"That's right."

The canvasmen were hard at work, and already the grounds began to look as if the circus had come to town. And still the loaded teams of the rival show hung outside the gate, and no attempt was made to enter.

"Looks as if they meant to find out whether they had any rights or not before they tried to carry the row any further," said Walt.

"Probably that is what they are about. Well, that is all I ask. I had no wish to take advantage. But I have the paper to show that the grounds were engaged, and also the license from the town, which also states where the show is to exhibit. Starr could show nothing, and there was nothing for me to do except to come in and put up my canvas."

"I don't think a little bit that they mean to give up the battle if there is the shadow of a chance to get the best of us. Starr is a fighter, and he evidently had his orders.

I think he expected us to come in on the grounds, and that there would be a dispute as to right. But he had no idea that you would put up a fight for them except through legal interference if he got here ahead of you."

"What are they driving at now, is the point that worries me."

"There come your other teams, and they have got to pass Tandy's, and we will see if anything happens."

The rest of Rushington's property teams were coming in a string, and even as Walt spoke the leader attempted to pass one of the wagons belonging to the rival show.

But the rival blocked the road and would not turn out.

"Now the real picnic begins," muttered Rush. And without another word he went out at the gate and approached his wagon, which the other refused to allow to enter at the gate.

CHAPTER IV.

"THIS EXPLAINS EVERYTHING."

The gate to the grounds was set about forty feet from the public roadway, and although so much of the space was not fenced in, it really belonged to the private corporation and not to the highway of the town. Therefore, the Tandy wagon that blocked the entrance was on the grounds of the corporation instead of the highway.

Rushington's driver was expostulating with the driver of the other wagon as Phil came up. Neither of the men yet showed any anger, but the one on the Tandy wagon was firm and the other persuasive.

"A part of our teams are inside the gate already," Rushington's man was saying. "This is the place where we were told to come, and I don't see how there can be any mistake."

"There is a mistake just the same, and your teams will all have to get out pretty soon," said Tandy's driver.

Starr was not in sight, and Rush assumed that he had gone to procure some kind of authority to enforce his claims to the grounds.

"But he can't get it, so I needn't worry," was Phil's thought.

The young circus owner was inclined to await the return of Starr, believing that the latter's failure to secure the support of the agent for the grounds would induce him to withdraw his claims without further struggle.

Still, there must not be much delay, for the work of putting up the canvas must proceed. Phil wished to be reasonable and to avoid a fight if possible.

"Why don't you come along, Struthers?" he asked of the driver.

"This man says that another show is ahead of yours in hiring the grounds, and that you will have to get out."

"He is mistaken. I have a license from the city, and also a receipt and another paper from the agent for the grounds, showing that they were regularly hired by Mr. Carpenter, my advance agent. So come along, I want to see the canvas going up, for it will soon be time for the street parade."

"The other wagon blocks the way."

"I guess he will let you pass. If his people show a better claim to the right to exhibit here than I have, then we will get out again, or give the Tandy people the right to use our tents and other properties on the ground. That is fair, and the best offer they will ever receive."

"You can't say anything against such an offer as that," said the driver called Struthers, appealing to the one who had refused to open a way for him.

"I have my orders, and they are not to move one of these teams for anything short of an earthquake until the boss gets back. And I'm the sort to obey orders."

Phil smiled grimly.

"I guess we'll have to get up an earthquake, then," he replied.

Struthers met the eyes of his employer, and there he saw an expression which he had seen there once or twice

before. And he knew that the young showman was not joking, even though his words were uttered with a smile.

"What shall I do, Mr. Rushington?" he asked.

"Drive in."

"You see where t'other wagon stands?"

"It will get out of the way when the driver sees you coming, for your wheels are the heaviest."

"You will have to get out of the way or I'll drive over you, mister," said Struthers, without a sign of bluster in his tone or words.

He was a young fellow, not much older than Phil himself, and as steady and industrious a young teamster as could be found. Indeed, Rushington made it a point to hire as youthful a crew as he could, with the idea of gaining for his show a reputation in the matter of the youth of all connected with it. It was a good point, and he had, in consequence, secured help of the most faithful kind, and men who worked all the handier under the bosses, who were all experienced.

The driver of the Tandy team hesitated.

"I wish Starr had stayed and faced out the row himself!" he growled.

"You are under no obligations to get yourself into trouble, that I see," said our hero, quietly. "If you have any papers to show your right to hold the grounds, I will respect them until the matter can be settled in a proper manner. But if you have none, it is foolishness for you to hold out. Of course I shall not allow any set of men to interfere with the timely exhibition of my circus when I have complied with every legal requirement."

"I am not blaming anybody," said the driver. "But I am the sort to stand by an agreement, and I am working on the earthquake schedule, as I told you."

"All right. Struthers, give him the technical warrant for letting you by. I guess his wagon will bear witness to there having been an earthquake along when you get through with it."

Struthers cracked his long whip over the heads of his four handsome horses. The heavy wagons started, there was a rumble of the big wheels, then a thump, a creak, a crash!

The other driver yelled and tried at the last moment to pull his horses out of the way. But he was too late. His wagon tilted, the wheels strained, he leaped off, and at the same time the drivers of the other Tandy wagons, who had been silent listeners and witnesses, made a dash to the rescue.

Ready hands caught at the wheels of the imperiled wagon and tried to haul it clear, for the wheels were locked with those of the team which was trying to pass.

Rushington had it on his lips to order Struthers to pull up and give the other a chance to get out of the way. But he thought better of it. He had given Tandy's men fair warning and what had been done was merely to gain an advantage. The rival crew had given no assurance of surrender, nor had they intimated that they would desist from their opposition if he were to give them a chance. It was a time when the battle must be fought out to the victorious end.

Struthers, young though he was, evidently interpreted

the conditions in a like manner, for he did not try to release the wheels which he had locked. At the same time Phil nodded a silent command to his other teams to advance, and the order was given simultaneously by half a dozen drivers.

It was an exciting moment. The young fellows in the employ of Phil Rushington saw in the whole affair the biggest kind of a lark, and what made it better than anything else in which they had ever engaged was the fact that they were doing nothing except to assert their rights.

"Hold on! You'll smash us all!" cried the driver who had refused to let Struthers pass.

"It is an earthquake," said Rushington. "If you will clear the track, say the word. We go by or through you!"

"Confound it all! Why don't Starr come along?"

"Here he comes! here he comes! and the agent of the grounds with him!" cried one of Tandy's men.

Struthers looked at Phil for a sign. But none was given. Phil had ordered him to advance, and it was plain that he was as much as ever resolved to have the order obeyed.

The heavy teams belonging to the Rushington show were now all in motion. Some of the drivers of the rival show were seeing to it that disaster did not come to their lighter loads, for they knew that their teams could not cope with those of the other circus.

The air was full of yells, while horses plunged and snorted, wheels cracked and axles creaked, and it looked

as if the whole space must be strewn with the canvas and wood belonging to the Tandy company.

Rushington, looking down the road, saw a light buggy coming at a lively pace. He recognized one of the occupants of the vehicle as Starr, the boss for the canvasmen of the other show. The one who drove the team was a fellow of about Rushington's own age, and at the first glance it seemed as if Phil had seen him somewhere before.

As the light team dashed up to the spot Phil became more than ever certain that the younger man's face was familiar; but at the moment he could not recall when or where he had seen the fellow before.

The red face of Starr became fairly livid. He yelled half a dozen orders to the drivers, all in the same breath, and as a result the one who had first blocked the way called out to Struthers:

"Hold up, won't you, and I'll get out of the way!"

Struthers held up, and at the same time Rushington signaled to his other teams to follow suit. But it was not an easy matter to disentangle the wheels, and already more than a little damage had been done to the teams belonging to the property wagons of Tandy's Two-Cent Wonder.

The moment that the wheels were released Struthers drove through the gate; but before the others could follow Starr called out:

"Hold on, unless you want the trouble of driving out again. This is the agent who let the grounds to Tandy's

advance man, and he says that he is prepared to support our claims to the exhibition grounds for to-day."

"That's right," said the youthful companion of Starr. "It is the Tandy show that has the prior right on the ground. The other people will have to get off!"

The face of the speaker was averted so that Rushington could not see it when he said this. But the voice sounded as familiar as the features had looked, and Phil stepped quickly up to the buggy.

"Is this Mr. Garno, the agent for these grounds?" Rush inquired.

"Mr. Garno is out of town to-day, but I am his clerk," said the other, still with averted face.

"Did you let the grounds to the agent for Tandy's Two-Tent Wonder?"

"I did."

"On what date?"

"On the fifteenth of the present month."

"My paper bears the date of the thirteenth. So I'm two days ahead of Tandy."

"There is no such record on our books. All engagements are booked on the date they are made, and there could be no mistakes. Of course, all the shows like to get ahead of rivals, but they must act on the square, and they will have no trouble about their exhibition grounds," said the young clerk for Mr. Garno, with a great air of virtue.

Phil Rushington quickly stepped around to the other side of the team, and by doing so obtained a fair view of the face of the youth.

"Louis Denton, formerly student at Springvale Academy!" burst from his lips.

The other faced about for the first time, but his eyes fell as they met the steady gaze of Phil Rushington.

It was no wonder that Louis Denton could not look the ex-champion athlete of Springvale in the face. For there, in the presence of several other students, Rushington had given him the severest drubbing of his life; and afterward, as our hero well knew, Denton made a cowardly attempt on Phil's life, in consequence of which the fellow had left the academy, never to return.

"This explains everything!" exclaimed Phil Rushington.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE GATE.

The history of the relations between Louis Denton and Phil Rushington is a long one, but enough may be said here to indicate a sufficient reason for the behavior of the young fellow in the incidents which are to follow.

After having soundly thrashed the fellow in a fair fist encounter, Rushington would have been glad to act a friendly part toward Denton. But the latter exhibited a revengeful disposition, and committed a cowardly act, which came near costing Phil his life. Later, even, our hero saved his enemy from drowning in the lake, at the imminent peril of his own life. After that Dent—as he was called—seemed for a time to try to behave more generously; but he was unpopular, and found it more comfortable in the end to leave the school for good.

From that day on Phil had seen or heard nothing of his old enemy. It was a surprise to him, therefore, to encounter him now, and under conditions that testified to the truth of the saying that “a leopard cannot change its spots.”

Now that it was no longer possible for Denton to conceal his identity from Phil Rushington, he faced the latter squarely, and a sneering and defiant expression settled upon his face.

“Pleasant to meet an old friend, isn’t it!” he remarked,

with the disagreeable smile which Rush remembered so well.

"If it isn't pleasant then it is your choice that renders it otherwise. There is not the slightest reason, Denton, why you and I should not meet as friends, and be ready to do each other a good turn instead of an ill one. If you remember, the last turn between us was good rather than ill."

"Want to pull on me through the plea of gratitude, eh?" sneered Denton.

"You know better than that. What I would wish for is an absolute burial of the past. Come, man, let us start in square, and when it comes to a settlement of this little business matter it can be done without prejudice on either side. All I want is the right. There seems to be a confusion of rights here, and there is no reason why you should not be able to clear the matter up. Say, Dent, in memory of the best part of the old times, let's act square with each other."

Phil's tone was kind and his manner cheery and frank, and it was not easy for the moment for the other to hold out against him. There is in every heart the elements of generosity, but in some they seem to be weighted down by so many selfish impulses that they cannot show themselves.

It may have been so with Denton. Phil, in any case, was not inclined to be uncharitable, and whatever he might do would be done from the force of necessity because reason and right dealing could not be made in any other way to prevail.

Denton was silent. Starr had alighted from the team and was directing the movements of the loaded wagons belonging to the Tandy circus.

For a moment it looked as though the kindly persuasions of Phil Rushington might prevail, and Denton be induced to allow the dispute to be settled on its merits. But there came back to him the memory of the old hatred of the handsome and successful youth at his side, and he hardened his heart.

"Who has intimated that I don't intend to act squarely with you?" he demanded, ill-naturedly.

Then Phil realized that the fellow was in no mood to be pacified.

"He is bound to try and make me all the trouble that he can," was the reflection of the young circus owner.

Instantly the latter assumed an air of dignity, and his tone was businesslike as he asked:

"Is Mr. Garno, the agent for the grounds, in town, Mr. Denton?"

"I have said once that he is not."

"When does he return?"

"In two or three days."

"You say all engagements of the grounds are booked?"

"Always."

"Well, I have Mr. Garno's signature to a paper dated the thirteenth, and on the strength of it I came here and advertised my circus for this day. I am already in possession of the grounds. If you let the grounds afterward for the same date to the Tandy company, it is a loss for them, and they will have legal recourse against the

corporation owning the grounds. It is too bad, and I would gladly save them from loss if I could do so without incurring a greater one for myself. That is the way the affair stands. Did you wish to see my paper?"

"I don't care how many papers you may have, so long as they are not genuine. It is easy to get papers filled out for any old thing."

"How about getting them signed?"

"That is easy, too. A signature proves nothing unless it is genuine."

"Do you imply, Mr. Denton, that I have been forging the name of Mr. Garno?"

"I know nothing about it except that there is no record of the engagement on our books, and I have to go by the record."

"And I care nothing about your record, since I hold a signed paper. You will find when it comes to a settlement of this little affair that a book record, or, rather, the absence of one, will not count against a signature."

Denton showed his teeth viciously.

"You will find, Phil Rushington, that you can't run a town like this one, and have everybody take up with you and hoot and cheer, as they did at the academy. I left word before I came away to have the police settle this affair if you refused to go off the grounds when I ordered. Now, what will you do? Tandy's rights are the only ones I can recognize. Will you get out of the way peaceably?"

"Look yonder, Denton, and you will see what course I have decided to pursue."

Rush pointed toward the grounds, which all his wagons had entered by this time. So swiftly were the men working that already the white canvas of the big tent began to show itself. The men were shouting and singing, as men do at such work, and there appeared to be no intention on their part of minding the question of rights to the grounds.

At this moment Starr came up. He was redder if possible than ever.

"You said that this crowd would get off the ground in short order if you arrived," he exclaimed, turning upon Denton.

"They have got their orders, but that Rushington will have to be arrested by the police, and have his stuff set off before he will come to terms. He knows no better than to make a fight of it whether he is right or wrong."

"What good will that do me after it is too late for me to set up my tents?"

"We'll have him get right out of the way. You can be getting your stuff drawn in on to the grounds. Set your men to work, the same as Rushington is doing. They won't dare to lay a hand on you. Go ahead—what are you waiting for?"

"I'm not going to go into a fight unless I'm sure somebody in the town will back me up in it."

"I have agreed to do that."

"What are you but a boy?"

"I represent Mr. Garno, who is the agent for the grounds."

"How old are you?"

Denton hesitated.

"Just twenty-one," he answered.

This was all heard by Rushington. The latter happened to know the exact age of Louis Denton, and that the latter was but little more than nineteen. But he did not correct the statement, as that could be done at the proper time, should there be a court case made of it.

It was clear that the affair could not be settled so far as Denton was concerned without trouble; but it was possible that Starr would refuse to take the responsibility of incurring a fight on the strength of the promised support of a boastful young man in the absence of the real agent for the grounds.

Phil was anxious enough to avoid complications, and there had already been more of delay than he relished. It was time for the arrival of the cages and performers belonging to his show, and as he thought of it he heard the rumble of more wagons coming from the direction of the station.

Glancing in that direction, he saw the elephants, of which there were now but two belonging to his show. At the same time, he saw Starr approach the drivers of the Tandy wagons, and hold a consultation with them.

Walt Arkwright had remained on the inside of the gate since the arrival of Starr and Denton, and he did not yet even know that the one who was acting agent for the grounds was an ex-student from Springvale.

Rushington found Walt, and in a few words explained to him the situation as it then stood.

Just then Walt pointed toward the gate.

"Starr has ordered his wagons to come, and they're going to try it," he exclaimed.

Phil sprang to the entrance with grimly compressed lips.

CHAPTER VI.

A NOVEL CONTEST.

Walt Arkwright followed Rushington to the entrance gate. At the same time from beyond a clump of trees the two elephants appeared, with their trainer riding beside them, and they were making for the gate at a quick step.

The horses of one of the Tandy teams were just at the gate as the form of Phil Rushington blocked the way.

"Stop!" cried the latter. "I forbid you to drive in!"

"Out of the way or we go over you!"

"Think well of it before you disobey my order."

The horses had been pulled up, for they could not advance without trampling Rushington under foot, as it seemed, and the driver had not quite the audacity to do that without further warning.

"Look out!" exclaimed Walt, in a low voice.

Phil beckoned to the man with the elephants, which were then almost at the gate. The man dismounted and advanced.

Not a dozen words were spoken by Rushington to the trainer, and the latter only nodded and grinned in response to these. But there was a perfect understanding, and as the driver of the foremost of Tandy's wagons again cracked his whip the elephants started at the same time.

The trainer was speaking to the elephants. The noise

of the wagons, the shouts of the men, the general confusion incident to the hurried advance, drowned the sound of his voice, so that not even Arkwright, who was nearest, heard what was said. But the result was patent enough to all.

The big animals advanced at a quicker pace, and the foremost crowded his big body up against the horses of the wagon which was trying to get through the gateway. The horses plunged and snorted with terror, the driver yelled and swung his whip, and Starr ran toward them joining his hoarse shouts to the hurley-burley of sounds in incoherent commands.

Rushington prudently got out of the way and looked on, breathing a little quicker, perhaps, but otherwise seeming as calm as ever. To him it was a moment in which he was to triumph once more over opposition, as he had so often done before.

With him to triumph was not to exult, for he had justice on his side, and there was no positive feeling of enmity toward those over whom he was triumphing.

It was an exciting moment. The driver of the foremost wagon was in an ugly mood, for it was the second time that he had been stopped from going into the grounds after attempting it. He seemed determined to persist in the attempt this time, and he made a frantic effort to drive his horses into a run and so to get them past the elephant which was trying to crowd in ahead of him.

The horses did nobly, but the driver forgot that an elephant is much more speedy in its movements than its

ponderous bulk would lead one to expect. The big animal kept abreast of the team, and just as the horses were passing in at the gate the elephant caught a hind wheel of the vehicle and suddenly braced for a pull.

The yelling ceased, and every man, whether friend or foe of Phil Rushington, became a silent and breathless witness of the strange contest.

The driver of the team lashed his horses, and the steeds strained at their load. The elephant strained at the wheel, the wagon tilted, the load swayed, the axle creaked, the whole team seemed doomed to annihilation.

The other drivers drew back out of the way. The contest was a lively one to witness, but they were not ambitious to take a hand in it.

Starr was the only man in the crowd to retain the use of his voice in the crisis. After the first suspenseful moment he dashed into the front rank, gesticulating frantically.

"Shoot the beast! Shoot him!" he cried.

Denton, alone in the light buggy, was ready to give the combatants a wide berth. Walt Arkwright saw the fellow edging away, and without a word as to his intention to Phil, Walt darted to the side of the trainer, who stood back with the smaller elephant.

"That young fellow in the buggy is responsible for all the trouble, and he means to prevent our giving our show on these grounds if he can do it. Can't you make Ellen give the fellow a scare?"

It was Walt who uttered the suggestion to the trainer.

The latter glanced at Denton, sized him up pretty accurately in that single look, and smiled.

"We won't let Ellen hurt him," he said. "But she may give him a lift if she likes."

The man shouted something, which no one else understood, to the animal which was pulling against the horses. Then he dodged back to the side of the smaller elephant, which was the one called Ellen, and said something to her, also in words which were meaningless to the men who heard him.

Instantly the beast wheeled, looked about her, and at her attendant. Then she marched toward Denton's team, and before the latter could divine her intention he was lifted from the seat and swung aloft.

Such a yell as went up to the clouds! And Denton furnished all the breath for it, and his legs did the kicking against the empty air, and his arms swung like the sails of a windmill.

Phil Rushington saw what was going on, and he was not slow to take advantage of it. In a flash he was at the trainer's side.

"Have Ellen hold him a minute," he hurriedly said.

"Easy with him—he mustn't be hurt. Can you depend on Ellen minding orders?"

"Sure thing," said the trainer.

"All right. Ah! a wagon smashed! Now I guess the other teams will keep out of the way!"

At the moment the wheel at which the other elephant was pulling collapsed, and the wagon went over, spilling its load, including the driver. The horses scrambled to

clear themselves, but two of Rushington's men dashed to the rescue and caught them by the head before they could make a run for it.

It was one of those moments in which a great deal happens. Phil could see that the attempt to enter at the gate was unlikely to be renewed while the elephant acted as doorman. Starr's blustering threats were not successful in inducing any one to try a shot at the big animal.

Meanwhile Ellen had lowered Denton to within about four feet of the ground, and there she held him suspended motionless awaiting further orders.

"Easy, Ellen," the trainer ordered.

At the same time our hero stepped up to Denton, who had ceased kicking, and who hung limp and with staring eyes in the grasp of the elephant.

"Dent, I don't want to have you smashed," said Phil, persuasively. "So don't you think you had better try and make terms with me, and I will make terms with Ellen, who would think nothing of tossing you ninety times higher than the moon if she were told to do it."

Dent uttered something which sounded as if it might have been profane if he had the breath to give it voice.

"Be careful, Dent," cautioned Rush. "You have made me a deal of trouble this morning, and you know perfectly well that I am merely enforcing a just claim. You don't really dare to call in the majesty of the law for a settlement of the matter, knowing as you do that you could not put up the shadow of a case. There isn't time now for a discussion of the merits of our claims, for you

will not relish hanging there in that fashion. I want a pledge from you. Will you give it?"

"Not if I know——" began the youth. Then he checked himself, for the trainer had given a sign to the animal, and Denton began to rise.

"Don't! don't!" he yelled.

"I want a pledge from you. Will you give it?" repeated our hero, in the same mild tones.

"Yes, yes! Let me down!" screamed Denton.

"A little lower, Ellen," said Phil. The trainer repeated the order in terms that the animal would understand, and Dent was again lowered to the four-foot limit. There he dangled, fairly gasping with terror.

"About the letting of these grounds to the Tandy show," Rushington proceeded. "Are you going to hold out on the business, now that you know as well as I do that I have the only rightful claim to the grounds for this day?"

"The books show——" began Denton.

He did not see the mute signal from Phil and the trainer, but he was conscious that he was again beginning to rise, and he hastily cried:

"It—it may have been a mistake! I didn't mean to do it, and I'm willing to make it right! I'll make it right, sure as I live!"

"Do you acknowledge that my engagement comes first?"

"I didn't think so in the first place. I thought you were bluffing. But if you have a paper signed by Garno, of course it is all right. I can't dispute anything with

his signature on it. But you can see that it puts me in an awkward place."

"Ellen has you in an awkward place now, Denton."

"Let up on me, and I will drop the matter right where it is. Sure as I live, I thought Tandy's company was ahead of yours, and I didn't want to let you bluff them out of their rights."

"Virtuous young man," smiled Rush. "Now that you are convinced you made a mistake of course you will be equally virtuous in correcting it. You ought to make things right with the Tandy show, but I will have to leave that for you to settle with them. But there is one thing you will have to do, just to make it sure that we may have no more annoyance from his source. I will speak to Mr. Starr, and you must say to him just what you have said to me."

Starr was called, and Denton repeated to him the statement which he had just made, virtually acknowledging that he had misrepresented the case in pretending that he believed the Tandy engagement to be the prior one.

Starr raved, more savage toward Denton than he had been against Rushington. Meanwhile Ellen released her victim. And without another word Dent jumped into the buggy and drove furiously back to the town.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CONSOLIDATED SHOWS.

Denton was more scared than hurt, and more hurt in his pride than in any part of his body by the antics of Ellen, the elephant. His statement concerning the rights of the Rushington circus to the grounds left the other show without "grounds" for resistance, legal or otherwise.

Starr raved, his face several shades redder than before. He was not the sort of man to take such things kindly. He had an overturned load of property blocking the way in through the gate, and a gang of ill-natured men to growl over every order he gave them.

The driver whose load had been upset by the elephant had received a fall that gave him a lame shoulder and a bruise under his eye, and he made no bones of telling Starr what he thought of him.

"Next time," Phil heard the man remark, "I try to go into grounds said to have been hired by this show I see the documents all straight, and there will be no other show already there that I have got to fight. If you want any fighting done, you will have to hire a separate gang of men to do it, I reckon."

"That's right," chimed in another.

"What Tandy's Two-Cent Thunder needs," said a third, who had heard of the title applied to the show by Phil Rushington, "is a little less lightning."

"Too much Starr-light," chipped in one of Phil's men, who had been ordered to help brace up the wagon and replace the load.

There was a roar of laughter, and that silenced the tirade of Starr, for he realized that a man who has made himself unpopular with a gang of workmen must give up all idea of trying to control them.

The way was soon cleared and the rest of Rushington's wagons, cages and other properties filed peacefully in through the gate. Phil sought out Starr, who was meekly directing the driver to be careful of the wagon with the bent axle, whose wheel revolved with a wobble.

"If you are a reasonable man, Mr. Starr, as I doubt not that you are ordinarily," said our hero, pleasantly, "you will realize that I had to make you the trouble that I have made purely in self-defense. You were used by that young upstart, who had a grudge against me, for the purpose of taking revenge on me for what he believes to be an old injury. You are not interested in the affair between Denton and me, and I will say no more about it. I am sorry you have been put to so much trouble and expense. There will be heavy loss to you. Anything that I or my men can do to help you out will be done cheerfully."

Starr glared for a moment in silence. Then he said, more graciously:

"You've got there, and I'm left, and I suppose I won't be the fool to squeal over it. But that young Denton will get his head wrung off'n him if I get a sight of him!"

"You have no idea how slight the fellow's loss will be, if you do nothing worse than to carry out that threat," smiled Phil.

The other grinned.

"You've got it right, I guess."

"The corporation controlling these grounds may be liable for your loss—I'm not sure on that point, of course. Whether Denton or his people can be made to pay I don't know. If you need the use of one of my wagons to take the place of the one of yours that was broken, until you can have that one repaired, it is at your service."

"Much obliged, Mr. Rushington. You are a squarer sort of man than I took you to be."

"That is nothing. Perhaps it was rough in me to let my elephant pull your wagon to pieces. But I gave the driver fair warning, and I felt as if I had a right to keep your wagons off the grounds at any cost."

"It was rough on us, but I suppose we ought to have kept out of the way after you had warned us of what you would do if we tried to come in. We'll let the matter rest. If I need one of your wagons I'll let you know. But I guess we'll need the crowd that you will get at your show more, for this affair will advertise you, and we have got to put up our tents in any old place that happens to be available."

It was found that the wagon which the elephant had tackled could not be used until it was repaired, and so the offer of Phil Rushington to furnish one of his property wagons for the temporary use of the other show was accepted. This helped to heal the fancied injury,

and before the hour for the street parade arrived Mr. Tandy, of the rival circus, came on to the grounds and inquired for Phil Rushington.

Tandy was a small man, with shrewd eyes and a bustling air. He seemed to be trying to "size up" our hero with one glance.

"Younger man, even, than I was led to believe," he remarked, with a nervous shrug of his shoulder.

"I hope you don't count that as altogether against me," smiled Phil.

"Oh, no. I knew you were young. Saw you mentioned in a newspaper as the 'boy showman,' but you know they call a man a boy orator or a boy politician if he gets into it at thirty, and I supposed that was about your figure. Really, you are very young. And you have a good show. But, say, Mr. Rushington, this was bad business for me, coming here when you were ahead of me on the grounds, and bound to draw more than half of the business, anyway. I haven't a place where I can put up my tents properly, unless I use the pasture lot opposite this one. And that will divide up the business, Don't you see!"

"It might not be well for either of us, that is a fact."

"Of course you would get the bulk of the patronage, and yet I must be to all the expense just the same. Do you know an idea occurred to me when I found that we were in a bad scrape, that some arrangement might be made to help both of us?"

"What was it?"

"With my two tents on the lot opposite I would draw some business, wouldn't I?"

"There can be no doubt of it."

"But you don't think I would get half?"

"That is a matter of opinion."

"I'll be honest about it, Rushington. I have a good show, but I suspect that you have as much in your single tent as I have in my two. Your horses look better than mine. If I had got here ahead of you I would have done well, and then you could have done well a month later. But my show is new and raw, betwixt you and me, Rushington."

"It is kind of you to say that, Mr. Tandy."

"It's merely shutting off all the bluster and bombast that we have to put on to the bills. It is spoken between ourselves as business men. You wouldn't repeat it. Your show isn't the only one on earth, no matter what your bills say."

"That is right."

"Now, I am afraid that you will suspect me of something crooked if I say what I had in mind."

"I don't think I will be unjust to you in the matter of judgment."

"All right. Then I'll make the proposition, and you may say frankly that you don't like it if you don't, and no hard feelings. Is that right?"

"Yes, and go ahead, though I will say in advance that I am cautious when it comes to new propositions of any kind."

"It is this: Let me turn in with my attractions and

add my show to yours to-day under the same canvas. Call it the Consolidated Rushington and Tandy Circuses and Hippodrome. I'll have bills posted before noon, and we'll join in the street parade."

This was certainly a somewhat startling proposition, yet it may be said that Rushington suspected what was coming before the word was actually spoken. And before the word was spoken, too, he had come to a decision.

"How about the financial part of the arrangement?" he asked.

"I am willing to leave that wholly to you. There is no money for me in this town to-day in any case, unless somebody makes me a present. Leave it that way. If I get a part of my expenses paid here to-day I shall consider myself lucky—now that is the truth."

"You are perfectly willing, then, to leave it so that I may allow you what seems to be drawn in in addition to what I would be likely to get if you were to give your show on the hillside opposite?"

"Yes. I would get some people from you, of course, but I don't think it would pay for me to put up my tents, and I wouldn't do it except that I hate to have the name of being put out like a candle."

"Very well, your proposition is accepted, and we will immediately set about the arrangement of the programme. If there is the shadow of a disagreement on that score I will ask you to drop out of it. On the other hand, I shall be fair with you, Mr. Tandy."

"I made the proposition, and agree to accept your terms, and if you think you don't take an extra dollar on

account of the share in the attractions furnished by my people, then I will not accept one from you. I'm a man of business. If I could set up my tents yonder and pull away the whole of your business I would do it. But I know I can't, and I'm willing to get out of the box I'm in the best way I can."

This settled it. A brief consultation was held for the arrangement of Tandy's share in the programme. Our hero found the other remarkably fair and free from jealousy. Indeed, Phil could not help but admire the spirit in which his rival met what was really quite a misfortune to him. And yet Phil was resolved to be on his guard and to see to it that the other had no chance to take advantage of him through the opportunity to be on the inside of the show.

It was decided that both should put their best features for the street show into the parade. Tandy volunteered to see that a few bills were printed announcing the consolidation of the two circuses. Then due announcement would be made by criers during the parade, which would amply advertise the matter.

"It strikes me," said Phil to Walt, "that the combination will be an assured success, and much better for both than it would be to attempt to divide the crowd. All who would have gone to the Tandy show will now surely attend ours, and as it will appear that twice as much will be given for the money as would be the case if either circus were to exhibit alone, a larger number will buy tickets."

"Good idea. And queer that Tandy should turn in in

that way, after there promised to be such a racket on account of the rivalry."

"Pleasanter, Walt. I wish things might always turn out in a peaceful way like that."

"This hasn't turned out yet—really," suggested Walt. But our hero was happy over the prospect of peace, and would not listen to a croak.

At this moment the performers in the two circuses began to arrive, and they made ready for the street parade.

CHAPTER VIII.

EONA, THE GIRL CENTAUR.

In the street parade the weakness of the Tandy Circus came out prominently enough. The Tandy band was about as poor a collection of noisy musical instruments as Phil Rushington had ever heard. It was so bad that, after playing once, Phil sent word back to the leader not to play again on the street.

Tandy had one lean old elephant, and his horses were ill-fed and poorly groomed. As our hero saw how they looked he was sorry that he had not inspected the outfit before allowing it to appear on the street with his own.

Of course, no small circus can expect to string out a grand procession of magnificent chariots and other features a mile in length. But Phil made it a point to have only the most spick-and-span features, so far as neatness and freshness of appearance went.

Yet there were two or three good features in the Tandy Circus, and of these Phil made the most. He was also informed that Tandy had a daring male rider, who would create a sensation when it came to the ring performance.

The Rushington part of the parade, however, made up for what the other lacked, and there was applause as some of the beautiful and easy riders passed. Rushington himself made, as usual, a fine appearance on his horse, and his two star female riders, whose names appeared on the bills as Mamie and Isabel, attracted the usual amount

of attention, it being well known that they were probably the best female bareback riders in the country.

Tandy did not ride on the street with his circus, and the two organizations were kept entirely distinct from each other.

Tandy had one girl rider only. Rushington did not see her at all until she appeared in the procession, and as he looked at her pallid face and sunken eyes he wondered if she could have the elasticity of body and spirits required for acrobatic feats on the back of her horse.

She was billed as Eona, the girl Centaur—a high-sounding circus name, which might hide only the plainest mediocrity as a rider. Mamie, the dashing girl rider in Rushington's ring, looked at Eona scornfully, while Isabel, the haughty star, seemed to regard the pale girl as scarcely worthy of recognition.

Walt took more interest in the stranger than did any other member of the Rushington circus company. To him her pallor and a certain sadness of countenance appealed with peculiar force.

He was eager to speak to her, and when the procession at last filed in at the gate of the ground an hour before the time for the performance to begin, Walt Arkwright was at hand to show her the way to the horse tent, and to take her hand as she dismounted.

"Is this your first season in the ring, Miss Eona?" Walt ventured to ask as the girl gave him a glance of mild surprise in return for his gallantry.

"My first season?" she echoed, as if she did not quite comprehend his meaning.

"You looked rather—rather young," Walt faltered. And yet, as he looked at her and uttered the remark he was impressed by a faint, flitting smile on her thin lips.

"I have had a little previous experience," she replied. "Still," she modestly added, "I do not expect to shine very brightly when I come to ride in comparison with the two stars in the Rushington circus."

"You are really the star in Tandy's show, aren't you?"

"He calls me that. But then, you know somebody must be called that, whether they deserve it or not."

"I suppose so. But I suspect that you can ride some, after all. You were very graceful in the parade."

She looked at Walt in that odd fashion again, as if she wondered if he were as honest as he seemed.

"I don't often fall off my horse when I am riding in the street parade," she said, demurely. "But I don't really make much of a boast as a rider. I just do as well as I can, and Mr. Tandy wanted to call something belonging to his show a star, so I consented to his making use of me in the place. Tandy is poor, and he has to go easy on weighty salaries."

"Did you ever see our Isabel ride?" Walt pursued, for there was to him a certain kind of fascination in talking with the pale and listless acting-rider of the Tandy company.

"I never saw her ride," was the reply.

"She seems to have been born in the saddle."

"That makes it easier than it would be if she had to acquire the equestrienne art without any natural gifts."

"I presume so. But I suspect that you are too modest

in your pretensions. I shall expect some fine riding when I see you come into the ring. I don't believe that you are very much afraid to ride before the two Rushington stars."

"Some afraid," she smiled.

"But you won't fall off your horse?"

"I may not to-day, because I will try extra hard on account of your proud girl riders looking at me."

For a moment it seemed as if the girl might actually smile, but she evidently thought better of it and sighed instead.

"She may not be so sad clear through, after all," thought Walt. "Nor so bad," was a second thought, as he saw her petting her horse and moving about with a peculiar sinuous movement of her slender body that reminded him of what he had read of Oriental dancing girls.

During the rest of the time before the performance Isabel failed to receive the attentions which she had of late enjoyed from Walt. To such attentions she had been quite indifferent, but now, as she suspected that Eona, the Girl Centaur of the Tandy company, was getting them, instead, she felt just a bit spiteful.

"Mr. Arkwright has queer taste, to be so taken up with that ghost of a girl," was Isabel's comment in speaking of it to Mamie.

"No man could call the loikes of her a peach!" said Mamie.

"Do you suppose she can ride?"

"She can stay on her nag, it may be, and it is loike

that she is the koind to stand on one foot and stick out the other, and look the while as if she was faling dangerous to be so safe."

"She seems to have an indifferent, discouraged way with her, and as Mr. Arkwright feels that way a good deal of the time, it may be that he has gone to her for sympathy."

"Oi think it is sympathy that he be's nading if he can foind annything to interest him in her."

It was not often that Mamie and Isabel talked together in such a friendly manner, but for once there was common ground of sympathy between them, and when Eona came in a moment later it was a wonder that her ears did not burn at the things which they said of her.

But she seemed to be entirely indifferent. She was pale and listless and she seated herself on a camp stool in a dejected way, as if she would have liked to sink out of sight into the earth. She appeared to be so lonely and unhappy that Mamie, who had a kind heart, in spite of the hard things she would say, felt conscience-smitten at having spoken of her in the way she had done.

The Irish girl approached her and spoke in a voice that was meant to be friendly.

"Ye don't look as if ye were feeling quite well, miss," Mamie ventured.

Eona raised her eyes, and Mamie felt a strange kind of thrill go through her as she met their glance. They were beautiful eyes, after all, with a quality in them that was fascinating even to another woman.

"I don't get much sleep," she answered.

"The Tandy show travels altogether with teams?"

"Yes. One is jolted out of one nap and into another."

"Iver ride in anny other circus?"

"Three seasons with Barnum & Bailey before——"

The girl checked herself and sighed. Mamie stared incredulously.

"And why did you lave them?"

"I was sick for one season, and my place was filled. Then there was another reason."

"Tandy was quite a drop from Barnum, Oi'm think-in'," said Mamie, who did not believe a word of what the other had said.

"Must have been many years ago," Isabel chipped in.

"I was quite young—once," said Eona.

The others stared. Then they exchanged glances. They began to suspect that they were not having their amusement entirely alone, and that they were not making the pale girl weaken so very much, after all. If she had not looked so innocent, they would have suspected that she was making fun of them secretly.

But, to look at her, that did not seem to be possible.

Phil Rushington came in, and a glance at the faces of Mamie and Isabel told him that they were "taking the measure" of the new girl. And, in turn, he gave her a quick glance, and she met it, and, even as had been the case with Mamie, he was startled by the singular beauty of her eyes.

"Not so bad, after all," was his thought.

"Are you all in good form for the work, girls?" he asked.

"Oi'm faling as if Oi might be crowded in the ring," laughed Mamie.

"And I hope I shall not be extinguished like a meteor falling into a lake," supplemented Isabel.

Eona's eyes were on her pretty slippers and she sighed.

Rush noted the extreme slenderness of her waist, and that her slippers could not have been larger than ones, and he thought of suggesting that she use some rouge on her cheeks, but decided that she might be more interesting in a way as she was. While he was thinking of these points the band struck up in the big tent, and he said:

"Perhaps Eona would rather ride first?"

"As Mr. Rushington pleases," she answered.

CHAPTER IX.

A NEW STAR.

While the parade had been on the street Rushington had received from Tandy another piece of news, which to him was neither surprising nor startling.

"There is a third tent show in this town to-day," was what the man said.

"What is that?"

"A crew of circus 'tramps'—acrobats and clowns who have been turned away from good shows because of misbehavior, have gotten together, bought or stolen some canvas, a few lean horses, and they're going about the country getting such crowds as they can. They will pitch their tent on the lot opposite to the grounds where we exhibit and at ten and twenty cents a head they will try to run us out."

"Let them try," laughed our hero. And that was the last he thought of them until he saw the dingy tent that was pitched in the pasture lot opposite to the fair grounds.

The crowd that they drew was not a large nor a select one, but there could be no doubt but there was talent in the troupe of "tramp" performers, and there were plenty of curious people who were willing to pay ten or twenty cents just to see what was inside of the small tent from within which issued strains of music which was better than that of most circus bands.

But by the people in the bigger tent the show in the

open pasture lot was entirely forgotten as they became absorbed in the acts in the ring.

Rushington sauntered into the tent as Eona rode out. He had doubted the propriety of allowing the pale girl to ride at all, for there had been comments made that suggested possible unpopularity before the beginning of the performance, and he knew what it meant to put an unpopular actor or feature into his ring. The story of it might follow him for a good while. A good thing is more easily forgotten than a poor one in the show business.

For one thing, he liked to have his riders and all others who had anything to do to show animation of manner, for that pleased even more than the skill displayed in the performance. A simple ride around the ring, well mounted, and with graceful salutes to the audience, often drew forth applause.

Eona appeared as if she were likely to fall asleep on her horse, or as if she were feeling sad or out of sorts about something. In the street parade she attracted no attention.

As Phil entered the tent, he saw Eona sitting her horse easily, and that the animal was increasing its pace as it struck out into the arena. He observed her keenly, and was surprised to see that there was a peculiar quality to her riding that could not be described by any of the phrases which are ordinarily applied to the art.

It was like the expression in her eyes, indescribably fascinating. He found himself watching her with a strange kind of eagerness. And as he glanced over the

tiers of seats he could see that the spectators were observing the rider with the same kind of interest, as though there was a fascination in her personality.

That was the secret of her charm. Of this there could be no doubt.

The horse which Eona rode was the only one in the Tandy show that was of real value. The animal had great speed, and the rider made the most of his quality.

Once she went around the ring, and then sprang to her feet and went through many of the ordinary acts which are seen in every circus. There was nothing original or startling in anything that she did; and yet the observers seemed to be holding their breaths with suspense.

It was all because of her mysterious personality and a certain rhythmical quality of her motions, which were poetic rather than daring or dashing.

"She is a wonder!" Phil heard a man say from a seat near him. At the same time there were several bursts of applause, and our hero wondered what they were applauding. She saluted the crowd several times, and her acknowledgments of their appreciation had in it a shy sort of charm that kept them applauding so that she would salute in return.

They seemed to wish to keep her doing the simplest things for the mere charm of having her do them. At last, when she dropped back to a sitting posture on her horse and rode from the ring, she was followed by the wildest of cheers.

"Great!" "Wonderful!" "Beautiful!" were the cries

that filled the air, and then there were calls for her to return.

Phil was in the dressing-room when Eona returned to it, with a brighter glow in her pale cheeks, and a new light in her eyes. But she did not look at him, and he felt that she was not seeking his approbation. And for that very reason she was destined to receive all the more of it.

"Have you been told that you are a most charming rider, Miss Eona?" he asked, standing before her.

"My riding is rather plain, I think," she answered. And yet, although she met his eyes for only an instant, he could see that she was pleased to have his praise.

"You do no startling things, and if you did them they would seem to be out of place in you. But everybody was charmed, of that there can be no doubt, and at the end of the performance I shall ask you to go out and receive their cheers. They want to see you again."

"Thank you, Mr. Rushington."

"You say you have filled engagements with the largest shows?"

"Yes."

"You could do so now, I am sure."

"Yes, I could obtain such an engagement."

"May I ask, then, why you remain with such a small company?"

"From choice."

"Yes. And I am not to question further?"

"It would hardly be best for me to say more at present."

"My reason for asking was not that of mere curiosity. I wished to know if it were impossible to induce you to ride in my ring, after your engagement with Mr. Tandy is terminated."

She looked at him sharply.

"What do you want of another lady rider?" she asked.

"To please the people—nothing else."

"You have two already."

"When you are at liberty, I want three."

"At what salary?"

"I will mention no figure until you are at liberty."

"I am at liberty now."

"How is that?"

"I joined Tandy's show with the understanding that I should remain with him only until a more satisfactory engagement could be made."

"You are sure that he understands it so?"

"He is here; ask him."

"I will take your word for it, although before engaging you it would be proper to speak to him, for he has treated me in a gentlemanly manner to-day, and I wish to take no advantage."

"He said to me that you would probably wish to engage me," she said, with drooping eyes.

"Did he! that is odd."

"Not many would think, to look at me, that I could secure an engagement more readily than any other rider in the ring. And yet such is the case. I have letters offering me chances. But I could not engage with any excepting——"

"My circus?" Phil asked, eagerly, as she hesitated.

"There are one or two others. It depends upon what route they may be following."

"Mine is all right?"

"I think so. You are not at present going back into the New England States?"

"No."

"Then there would be no objection on that score."

"Then I will talk with you later. We will wait until we see how the public receives you to-night on your last appearance."

"Very well. I think I should enjoy being with the Rushington Circus," said Eona, with that flickering smile which all who spoke with her learned to watch for, because it was so rare and beautiful.

"Our turn," said a voice.

It was Isabel, and Phil started with an embarrassment which she was quick to see.

"So it is. Well, ride out and I will follow."

He sprang to his horse, and soon he was racing around the ring with his star rider, who brought to the audience many surprises which caused them to applaud without stint. And yet any observer could have seen that Eona, the mysterious, pale-faced girl who had first appeared had found a place in the fancy of the public which greater beauty or dash or daring could not make them forget.

Phil was disappointed.

He would have preferred that Isabel remain the favorite. There were many reasons for this. He was not

really quite ready to add to his list of female riders. At the same time he knew that to engage another, who was bound to become a favorite, would create trouble in camp. Isabel was of a jealous disposition, and she was free to express her displeasure whenever she thought he was inclined to encourage a new favorite in the ring.

After the performance, in which Isabel was assisted by Phil, Mamie came out and went through with her wild and dashing evolutions, with the accompaniment of fun which always "caught the crowd." Then followed a new act which was announced on the bills, but which they had not before given in public. They had been rehearsing for it for some time.

Over the sawdust were strung a network of ropes formed according to the lines of the outdoor game of "fox and geese," which most young people have played, especially where there is snow in winter time for the making of paths.

The horses were returned to their tents, and Rushington, Isabel, Walt Arkwright and Mamie came out in suitable costumes, and all sprang upon the ropes, which were tight.

Nearly all circus performers begin their training with tight-rope walking. It is something that calls for practice and a cool head, and that is all. Almost any active person can learn plain walking on the rope, which is merely a matter of keeping one's balance.

The "act" that followed was more a matter of novelty than of great daring, although the ropes were strung at a good height above the sawdust, and the movements of

the actors as they chased one another back and forth along the ropes were somewhat dizzy to observe.

They had practiced the game together until they had perfect confidence and ability. They ran, and the girls laughed gleefully, and as they were all so young and pleasing in appearance, it made a pretty act, and one that pleased better than anything else excepting the riding.

This ended, all received the loudest applause. The big tent was filled with people who were growing more and more enthusiastic every moment.

Eona, however, came out last for the second time, and it seemed as if they would bring the tent down with their cheering.

Isabel tapped Phil on the arm and whispered:

“A new star—good-by to the old!”

CHAPTER X.

WHAT MAMIE SAID.

The combination was a success in the afternoon, and such a good story of it went out that there was a yet larger attendance in the evening. Phil already figured on paying Tandy a liberal sum for the share of his artists, of whom Eona was, of course, the first.

There could be no doubt that she was a strong drawing card in the evening, although the attendance would have been equally large without her in the afternoon.

In the evening audience was Denton, the youth who, through his maliciousness, was responsible for the combination of the two shows, although indirectly so. He sat in an obscure corner, and hoped to escape the sight of Phil altogether. But in that he was unsuccessful.

Rushington saw him, and in the expression of the fellow's face he observed the sullen hate which had dwelt and been nourished in his heart so long.

The youth did not remain in the tent until the close of the evening performance. When he went out, Rush did not notice. He had no thought of seeing or hearing from him in any other way during his stay in the town.

The evening performance went off with its usual success. Once more the final act came, the last plaudits rang through the tent, the last bow was made, the last joke and folly worked off by the clowns, and the last noisy tune played by the band.

To Rushington and his actors it all seemed so stale; to the surging crowd who rushed from the tent it was all so wonderful and so grand. To some of the people in the ring it was all a wearisome business, and as prosy as the commonest toil; to the crowds who packed the tiers of seats the glitter and tinsel, the bows and smiles and kissing of fingers were full of romance and life of the kind that it seemed worth while to live.

There were plenty in the audience—and they were not all boys, either—who would have been glad to exchange places with the poorest-paid actors in the arena, and even the life of the canvas and property men had in it something of the poetry of the show.

The big crowd flocked out of the tent, and Rushington and Tandy were arranging the matter of a division of the profits while the canvas that covered the multitude rolled from above their heads like a scroll, and the seats and all the properties were hustled from their places onto the wagons, and the rumble of their departure was heard along the road.

“It was a success, the combination, and so far as profits were concerned, if they could be kept up at the same figure, I wouldn’t mind making the combination a permanent thing,” said Mr. Tandy.

“If I could afford to go into anything so heavy,” said Phil, “I might suggest taking a partner and combining the shows. But you can see how it would be a departure that would be likely to turn my present success into a certain failure.”

“How is that?”

"The heavier expenses of the bigger circus would demand a route which would shut out the smaller towns. That would bring us into direct competition with the greatest shows in the country. And do you know what it means to compete with them?"

"Big capital or big debts."

"Both, usually. I can't do it—not now. I'm not sure that I shall wish to follow the show business all my life in any case. I've begun pretty young."

"Should say you had. Well, about my star rider, then. You think you will have to have her?"

"She is needed, and in a modest way I must strive to satisfy the demands of the people. But I expect it will bring trouble into my camp. Then, so far, I have known something about the character and history of all of my performers. I shrink from taking on strangers. Do you know anything about this girl?"

"Next to nothing. She is one of the most successful artists in her line in the country."

"She impresses one as having a plain face and of lacking the dash and life required."

"There is the very charm of her. She is a surprise, and the people like surprises. Besides, will you solemnly declare that she isn't a beautiful girl?"

"In a way, she is plain looking."

"Can you keep your eyes off her, in the ring or out of it—say? And isn't it just the same with all the people? Why, when she comes into the tent or goes out, every move she makes, the people stare fit to die. She is a curiosity, and without being able to explain why she is

so, I must say that she is more fascinating, twice over, than your charming Isabel. And won't your star be jealous, eh?"

Our hero did not answer. He did not feel like acting hastily in the matter. Yet at that very moment he heard some shouts from the departing crowd, and in them he caught the name of Eona, repeated several times. And there was no disrespect in it. The charm seemed to be a wholesome one, so far as the public was concerned.

"You cannot drop her here, Mr. Tandy?" Phil inquired.

The other was silent for a moment, and Phil could see that the man felt the need of saying something which was unpleasant to utter.

"Don't let anything embarrass you," said Phil, reaching out in a friendly way for the showman's hand.

"I can't pay her a dollar of her salary if she stays with me, and she knows it. She is just with me on expenses, and I have no business to keep her an hour after she has an offer of anything better. You see, Rushington, I got thrown down pretty flat last winter, and I can't swing the cost of a show anyway, but I'm just scratching along in the hope that something may turn up. I haven't a salaried performer to my name."

"I didn't understand. Well, don't feel bad about it. I wish I could take you as a partner, really, for if I was to have one I never saw a man that I thought I could work with more pleasantly."

"I didn't expect it, Rushington, but I will confess that I should not have refused such a proposition if it had

come, and you wouldn't be obliged to put out any cash for my properties, either. And you wouldn't have had to increase the salary list any more than you had thought best. But I won't talk about it. You don't want to do it, and I don't blame you. When a man is doing a safe business he had better take care of what he goes into."

"I will have to have Eona, Mr. Tandy."

"Have you spoken to her about it?"

"Yes. But the matter of salary was not decided on."

"You can fix that to suit yourself, if she likes your show, for salary is not so much of an object with her as it is to be where she can be happy and comfortable."

"Some mystery about her, then?"

"Yes. And that makes her the more interesting. Let just a hint of it go on to the bills and you have the people following you wherever you go."

"Then I will see if she will accompany us from here to the next town."

"She will be glad to do it."

Rushington first sought Isabel and Mamie. He found the latter making ready for her departure to the station. She looked sleepy and cross.

"Where is the ghost, Rushy?" she asked, with her back toward him.

"What do you mean, Mamie?"

"The ghost—the specter rider that ye put into the ring as a sensation? Are ye going to kape her wid the show till she is ready to go back to the shades of her fathers?"

"Don't make fun of the girl, Mamie, for she has a

charm of her own, and it is nothing to make you jealous, either."

"Jealous, is it! I belave not. Not of the likes of her. Oh, she can ride. She could go through the air without a horse or anny other old thing beneath her. Hire her by all manes, for she won't ate annything, and she doesn't nade to sleep. She will be chape for ye."

Phil could bear the chaffing of Mamie, even when she was out of humor, for she was always bright in wit, and her comments were of the sort that one must laugh at.

"Where is Isabel?" Phil asked.

"I haven't seen her but once since the show."

"Where was she then?"

"On her horse. I belave she meant to ride the baste to the station ahead of the crowd, just for the air."

"She ought not to do that. I don't like to have you or her go off like that alone in the night without an escort. It is unsafe."

"Catch her, thin, and tell her so. But ye will foind it hard to kape a string on her. That wraith that ye've hired to take the places of Isabel and me——"

"Oh, Mamie, you will really make me tired if you talk in that fashion. I thought you had more sense, but I believe you really mean a part of what you are saying."

"I mane the whole of it."

Phil looked sharply in the face of the Irish girl, but she turned her back on him, and he had a hard chase of it to get a glimpse into her blue eyes. When he did so at last he saw that there were tears in them.

He caught her hand and held it kindly, and she began to sob like a child.

"You are tired, Mamie, and you don't know what you have said," he exclaimed.

"That's right, and ye mustn't moind."

"Eona, nor anybody, will ever take the place of my little friend of years ago. You trained for the stage and for the ring for me, Mamie, and remember that no one holds a place above you in my circus. Better than that, you are my true friend, and I feel sure of it every time, and all the time."

"That's roight, Rushy."

"I will have to add to the attractions of my show, but you will stay."

"That's roight. And don't moind. It is tired that Oi am!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE SEARCH FOR ISABEL.

The great show was at the station, and the loading was done, and it was time for the train to start. But something was missing, and something important at that.

Isabel, the star rider of the Mossman & Rushington Circus and Hippodrome, was not at the station, and no one had seen her since she rode away from the tent, having told Mamie that she would go in that fashion to the station.

There were two horses which were not loaded for the journey to the next town where they were to exhibit. One of these was mounted by Phil Rushington, the other by Walt Arkwright.

"If she is doing this to annoy me, she will get a call-down for it that she will remember," said Phil, as they rode back to the town through the darkness of the small hours.

"She wouldn't do it for that," said Walt, who never thought ill of anybody.

"But it is unreasonable to suppose that she couldn't ride to the station without being held up on the road, or kidnaped."

"She wouldn't do it as a trick, I'm sure. She likes you too well."

"She may be angry because of the favor shown to the new rider. She has a jealous disposition."

"She wouldn't show it in that way, Phil. No, something is wrong, I feel sure of it, and whatever you do, I shall stay and keep the search going until she is found."

"The train will have to go with the rest of the show in just an hour, for the track won't be clear for us so that we can get through later. That won't matter seriously if one of us can get there on a regular train before noon. But there is no time to waste, and I am concerned about the girl. She had no business to go off in this way without permission."

"I suppose she thought she had some liberty."

"No member of my company can go and come in that way. I would not allow it. There must be some discipline, as well as kindness."

Nothing had been seen of Isabel in the town, nor was there any one who had seen her on the road, after leaving the grounds. She seemed to have dropped out of sight after riding forth from the horse tent.

Of course, there were not many people on the road at that hour, but there were some stragglers on their way home from the shows, for there were as good as three in the town in that night, counting the Rushington and Tandy combinations as two.

A ride alone the whole length of the road from the station to the main part of the town, with such inquiries as could be made on the way, were without result. Back at the station no tidings had been heard, and it was decided that the train would have to go.

Rushington had been impatient at first, but now he was alarmed.

"There is a black look to this business, Walt, and I don't like it!" he exclaimed, as they paused for a consultation just as the train was departing.

"She must be found. I told you in the first place that it was no joke," said Walt.

Back along the road they raced.

It was dark, for there were clouds and no moon behind them. As they passed the pasture lot where the "tramp circus" had their exhibition they could see that the tent was still there, and there were lights glimmering on the hillside. That was not all. From within the tent came sounds of singing and laughter.

"They are a hard lot, evidently," said Phil, pulling up his horse to listen.

"No doubt about that."

"Look here, Walt. We have looked-everywhere else. You don't suppose——"

"We'll go up and see," said Walt, grimly, without waiting for his chum to finish the sentence.

"Only one of us, Walt. You wait here and take care of the horses. I will soon know if she is there. But they would not dare to detain her—they would not dare!"

"Hurry up, Phil."

Phil dismounted and jumped over the pasture fence. He ran up the slope, stumbling over stones and hummocks, once falling headlong.

As he neared the tent he nearly collided with some one who was coming down. The other did not apologize, but by the glow from a cigar which he was smoking Phil saw the fellow's face.

"Louis Denton!" he exclaimed.

"That's all right," said Denton. He would have passed on, but Phil laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"You just came out from the tent up there?" he asked.

"Yes. What of it?"

"The performance is over, of course?"

"Two hours ago."

"Do you—do you know anything about Miss Currier—my star rider known as Isabel?"

Denton laughed.

"Do I?" he retorted. "Well, I should smile!"

Our hero caught the fellow by the collar and held him as in a vise. Denton struck out, but his wrist was caught and held, and he was as helpless as a baby in the grasp of the Springvale athlete.

"Now will you turn a civil question into a joke, you scoundrel? Speak, or I will not leave a whole bone in your body!"

The wrath of Phil Rushington was all the more earnest for being so rarely aroused. And it always showed up in a just cause.

"She—she is there!" gasped Denton, his face white as a sheet.

"She is where?"

"In the tent."

"With what crowd?"

"Ask me no more questions. There is somebody there that she knows, and I suppose she has a right to go where she pleases. I know nothing about it. She is safe enough, I guess, and not worrying about you."

Rushington flung Denton from him with so much force that the youth nearly fell headlong. A fierce exclamation came from Denton's lips as he plunged down the hillside, and not for some time was Phil Rushington to see him again.

At the top of the slope Phil paused, out of breath. A cool breeze fanned his hot cheeks. Overhead, the clouds were racing, with stars blinking through them—stars which never failed to be in their places, and about which no one ever has to feel concern—stars which were never jealous, and which, unlike the human kind, do not suffer.

Some one flitted forth from the tent, and Rushington sprang forward and caught a slender arm. There was no outcry, yet he looked into the face of Isabel!

"Come—come back with me!" he huskily commanded.

"I was coming," she said. "My horse is yonder, hitched to a tree."

They walked out to where the horse was standing, her arm in his, her hand clinging. He knew that she was trembling, and he suspected that she was crying.

"Walt is down there waiting for us. Our train is gone," said Rushington.

"I didn't know it was so late. And you and Walt were looking for me?"

"Of course we should not have gone without you."

"I was cruel—wrong in every way! You will not forgive me, I am afraid, and it will kill me if you do not!"

"Why were you here, Isabel?"

The horse was ready for her to mount. But then she

suddenly flung her arms around his neck, and rested her face on his shoulder.

"Say you forgive me, or I will not go back with you!" she cried.

"How can I say that when I don't know that there is anything to forgive?"

"I was thoughtless of your trouble and worry and loss, and I wish to be forgiven that."

"That is forgiven."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. But you can say more than this to me, can you not?"

"In time, but not to-night. I have asked you to trust me before, and now I ask you to do so again. Will you?"

Phil Rushington hesitated.

Her lips touched his cheek. He could feel them move as she whispered, pleadingly:

"Believe me, I am not unworthy of your kindness. Trust me! trust me!"

"I thought you had given me your full confidence once."

"About my parentage. But there is more, and you shall know it. Trust me, please—please!"

"How long before you will tell me?"

"Trust me this time without any promise. Please—please!"

"Yes, Isabel."

"Without any promise?"

"This time. But don't try my confidence too hard."

"I do not think I will have to again. You are so good—better than anybody else in the world!"

Down the slope they walked together, Rush leading her horse.

"What will you tell Walt?" she asked, when they were nearly to the road.

"Nothing that I don't know."

"He will be curious."

"No more than I."

"He may not be ready to feel confidence for the future."

"He will be as ready as I. It will trouble him less."

"Well, I cannot tell you now. We are just the best—the very best—of friends, aren't we, Philip?"

"The best of friends, Isabel."

Walt asked no questions. As they rode back to the station together, few words were spoken, and when Walt and our hero chanced to be alone the latter only said:

"We will have to trust Isabel, Walt, without suspecting her of any evil. I believe that she is a good girl and true to my interests and to our friendship."

"Of course she is, Rush. You mustn't think she isn't. I thought likely that she had told you, anyway."

"I know no more than you."

They followed the circus train on a regular express, and arrived in the next town where they were to exhibit in ample season.

On the way Rushington told Isabel of the engagement of Eona, and she only laughed and said:

“Don’t you care, Phil Rushington! Mamie and I can ride all around her, and you know it!”

“But the crowd admires her style—why, I do not know.”

“And the manager of this circus admires her style—why, Heaven only knows!” laughed Isabel.

CHAPTER XII.

MELTON, THE CLOWN.

In spite of his business engagements, Phil often found himself wondering what the secret of Isabel's life could be.

One day Walt came to him, in the midst of a performance, with an anxious look on his face.

"What is it?" asked the young circus owner.

"Observe Melton, the clown, will you, Rush?"

"What is the matter with him?"

"Notice when Isabel rides past him, and he, on his donkey, pretends to try to race with her, that he leans over and seems to whisper something to her. Of course, if he says anything, it can't be in a whisper with the band making more noise than a trainload of calves. If you could only ride past them suddenly you might 'catch on.'"

It was at the afternoon performance of the show, in a small city a little north of Baltimore. The morning had been hot; the midday was hotter; the afternoon was of the kind to make the people swelter. There was the odor of steamy tanbark and perspiring humanity, mingling with countless other odors which go to make up the "smell" of a circus on a hot day.

It was Phil's habit to ride a few turns around the ring with Isabel, as we know, but on this afternoon he had decided to let the public do without him. His own fine horse was not in the best shape to ride that day, on ac-

count of having become a little overheated on the previous day.

With Walt, Rushington was near the main exit for the ring riders. There were two trapeze performers just going off, and Isabel had just come on. She was making her preliminary circuits of the ring, going with greater speed at each turn.

As Rush and Walt observed her circling around the track in ever-increasing swiftness, she seemed to have become a part of the animal she rode. As she sprang to her feet, and began to go through the evolutions which made up the details of her act, Phil wondered if she were not doing better than she had ever done before.

He forgot the matter of which Walt had just spoken. He cared not for the moment what the subjects of the clown's confidences might have been. That the lovely Isabel could be involved in anything that was not perfectly right did not then seem among the possibilities.

So Phil did not act upon the suggestion of his chum. He saw the clown return to his "business" of making a comical mimicry of the riding of the star, and they appeared to pay no further attention to each other.

"It was nothing but some of Melton's foolery, Walt," said Phil.

"I thought so at first. But you know that I have been acting somewhat in the capacity of detective almost ever since you first started out, and I have got to be rather cranky about observing things. You have good reason to know that I would not be likely to imagine anything against Isabel, Rush"—and the voice of Walt had a dif-

ferent tone in it—"I like her too well to suspect her of anything very wrong. But there are a lot of things that I don't understand."

"About her, do you mean?"

"About her."

"What are they?"

"You remember the affair of her visiting the tent of that vagabond circus?"

Phil was watching the ring, and he was careful not to let his chum see the look on his face.

"I remember," he answered.

"Perhaps she has explained the affair to you, and you mustn't think that I am prying into any secrets because I speak of it."

"It has not been explained, Walt, and if it had I would tell you of it, unless she wished me to positively agree not to do so."

"Well, that is one of the things. Then you know that she has been followed by several rather questionable characters—Joseph Saunders, for instance—and the rascal who is represented to be her father."

"That has been partly explained."

"Yes. But I have observed before that she seemed to be quite friendly with Melton, and Melton I don't like."

Our hero made no reply, but Walt knew that he disliked Melton, also.

"I have also spoken at the time, I believe, that your lion escaped from the cage in the city of Columbus, of the fact that you seemed to be followed by a secret enemy,

or that you had one as a member of your company. You remember that?"

"I have tried hard to forget it, Walt."

"Just the matter of our hitting that town at the same time with two other shows is another straw. While Denton, as clerk for the association owning the grounds, was responsible for the letting of the grounds to two different shows for the same day, that doesn't explain the whole of it, to my mind. I am not poking around to find bugaboos, Phil, and you know I'm no hand to croak——"

"Except when a girl goes back on you——"

"Let up, Phil! I haven't given way to that foolishness for a good while."

"Haven't had a chance to get stuck on a new girl, that's why. But don't let me interrupt, for really I am taking what you say seriously."

"I think I have mentioned enough signs to convince you that there is a persistent enemy following you in every one of your enterprises. My idea is that the enemy is not himself connected with your show, but that he is in communication with some member of your company."

"Have you any definite information relating to this matter?"

"Nothing of any consequence."

"You have something?"

Walt was silent, and his head was down in a way that Phil knew betokened a kind of embarrassment, which, in any one else, he would have thought was a feeling of

guilt. Walt was not just like anybody else, however—not like anybody in the world, as Phil would have sworn.

“Come, old man, get your head back to the level where you keep it when you feel moved to talk,” laughed Phil.

“I don’t like to say,” said Walt, drawing back.

“It has got to come out if it is something crooked, and you know I can’t afford to be humbugged. You must stand by me whether you like to say it or not.”

“It is about a letter, and we have nothing really to do with letters that belong to other people.”

“That’s right. But if you have any certain information of importance that came into your possession by any kind of chance the thing for you to do is to let me have it.”

Walt slowly took a letter from his pocket, saying as he did so:

“I don’t know a word that is inside of this. I picked it up a little while ago right in front of one of the dressing-rooms. Isabel must have dropped it, and, as the postmark shows, it came to her in the last town that we visited before this.”

He put the letter in the hands of the young circus owner. It was a square envelope of a large size, and in the upper left-hand corner it bore the name and manager’s address of the new circus which was represented by Joseph Saunders. The letter was addressed to Isabel Currier, the star rider, who was at that moment kissing her dainty fingers to the applauding crowd.

The letter had been opened, and there was nothing to hinder Phil from learning the contents. There was the

best of reasons for his having an interest in the contents; yet he never seriously thought of availing himself of the chance. He merely glanced at the superscription, noted where it came from, and then handed it back.

“Give it to Isabel at the first opportunity,” he said.

“All right. But it is a straw just the same.”

Just then Isabel rode out of the ring.

CHAPTER XIII.

ONE SHADOW LIFTED.

"It is a straw just the same!"

The words rang in the ears of Phil Rushington like a disagreeable prophecy. He had given the letter back to Walt, as has been stated, telling him to restore it to the one who had lost it. Now, as Isabel went out of the ring, he laid a hand on the arm of his chum, saying:

"If you have no objection, Walt, I will give her the letter. At the same time I will be frank with her."

"All right, I wish you would give it to her, for I don't like to watch anybody that I count as a friend. I can't do it very well when it comes to that."

"I like to be frank with friends, anyhow. Maybe I am foolish about it, but I hold that the moment one has an uncomfortable suspicion against a person one has confidence in, or with whom one has been most friendly, he should go and have the matter cleared up, if possible. We've no business to lose our friends as we do sometimes. If we lose them it should be only after we have spared no pains to keep them true. What though we do find that they haven't been square with us? If we find it out we may by our kindness make them sorry for it, without humiliating them, either. Don't you think so, Walt?"

"I think you are all right, Phil, and a lot better than

some of the preachers. If you have an enemy in the world it isn't your fault, that's sure."

"Now you are putting it on rather thick, Walt, and it will peel off. I have one of the worst tempers of any fellow living, and it is by a mercy that is beyond me that I'm not a murderer, as you know. Do you remember the fight with Denton at Springvale?"

"You fought him because you had to, and you struck too heavy, that was all. If he had never recovered from it not a boy who saw the fight would have blamed you."

"When he hit me my head was on fire. I was blind for a moment, and could not have told night from day. It was when I could not even see his face that I struck the blow that sent him to the earth."

"We all knew it."

"But that tells what a temper I have."

"And the way you felt about it afterward shows what a white heart you have."

"There, you are bound to turn on a man whatever he may say, and I can't make you understand that I'm ugly and a dangerous man, generally. I'll go and see Isabel. No; here is Eona, the Girl Centaur. I must watch her, just because she is like no one else that ever rode in the ring, and not because she is the most perfect rider, or that she has beauty to recommend her."

"She is beautiful, just the same," muttered Walt.

Around and around rode Eona, while Melton, the clown, astride his donkey, tried to keep pace with her. As he had mimicked the movements of Isabel, so he now attempted to "take off" the languid grace of Eona, and

the effect was comical. And yet for once the antics of the clown seemed not to amuse the crowd. Even the boys preferred to watch the pale rider who kept them in a constant state of breathless expectancy.

"So Philip Rushington is enjoying his own show, and so fascinated that he hardly knows the time of day it is!" exclaimed a voice which caused Phil to face about quickly.

"I was waiting to see you, Isabel. I have a letter here that you must have lost."

She took the letter with a well-feigned appearance of surprise of the indifferent sort.

"Yes, it is mine. Thank you, Philip."

She held the letter carelessly in her hand and did not appear delicate about letting him see the outside of it.

"Did I do as well as usual to-day?" she asked, in almost the same breath.

"Yes. You did better than usual, and I intended to say to you, as I did a moment ago to Walt, that I think you are growing more beautiful and more skillful as a rider every day."

Her eyes brightened with pleasure.

"It makes me happy to have you say that."

"It pleases me no less to be able to say it. Now, don't think that I wish to poison the pleasant words with some more that are not so agreeable, for that isn't my way, as you ought to know. But I think that we ought to be perfectly frank with each other. Don't you?"

"You know I think so, Philip."

"Do you think that I have ever shown idle curiosity about you or your affairs?"

"No."

"Do you not think that my friendship should give me the right to be interested in you in all ways?"

"Of course it does. What are you trying to get at, Philip? You are as solemn as an owl, and I begin to feel scared."

"Don't feel that way. I'm not going to give you a 'call-down.' But I do wish to know what is the nature of your correspondence with Joseph Saunders, of the Ridgeley Mammoth Menagerie and Circus. Are you willing to tell me?"

Isabel did not seem to be angry when he asked her the question about the letter, but that she was at a loss what answer to make was evident enough.

"If I were to tell you the contents of all the letters I receive I would be telling what the writers might not wish me to disclose. You know the one who writes a letter deserves to be thought of," she said at last, raising her eyes and smiling.

Had Walt Arkwright been her questioner that smile would have finished the business. Not so with Phil. It made him admire her beauty the more, but it did not affect his judgment.

"The reason I ask in this case, Isabel, is that Joseph Saunders is not a friend to me or to my interests, and he once did me a deep injury. On another occasion he sought to hire you away from me. If you wish to engage with another circus you can do so without keeping your intention a secret from me."

"I do not wish to engage with another circus, Philip."

"You came near to doing so at the solicitation of this correspondent of yours when we were in the city of Columbus. It was in that city also that I met with a considerable misfortune which resulted in loss to me, in the escape of my largest lion. The animal was recovered, but there was heavy cost to me, and there might have been greater yet. The affair has never been explained, and it has occurred to me more than once that I had a secret enemy working me injury on every opportunity."

"Do you think I am such an enemy?"

"No, no. But you might play into the hands of one without knowing it."

"I do not think I could be so easily deceived. But if you cannot trust me——"

"Pardon me, but it is you who do not trust me."

She bit her lips.

"I am trying to get so that I won't trust anybody or care for anybody!" she exclaimed.

"Nonsense! That is the way they talk in some kinds of stories and some kinds of plays, Isabel. If I give up the circus business for a season by and by and go back to the dramatic, I think you would train well for the stage."

She looked straight into his eyes, and as she saw laughter in them her own filled with tears.

"Now you are making fun of me!" she cried.

"I meant what I said. If at the end of the circus season I were to go into something else I shouldn't wish to give up having you with me."

"Wouldn't you? Would you really care? Awfully

good of you to say that, whether you meant it or not. Oh, Philip, you are getting wicked and flirtatious. Here, read the old letter, and then, if you want to think me a double-dealer, I'll have to let you."

She laughed, and her voice was like music and her eyes like stars as they met his for an instant. Then she flung the letter at him and darted away into the dressing-room.

CHAPTER XIV.

ARKWRIGHT AND MELTON.

Phil felt like calling Isabel back when she ran away from him in that way. But he probably could not have made her return to him at that moment if he had called ever so long or so loud. So he did not try, and read the letter from Joseph Saunders instead.

Omitting the usual beginning, the letter was as follows:

"You are a shy minx, I'll say that for you, and it begins to look as if nothing would induce you to leave the young showman you have engaged with. Money and the offer of all kinds of distinctions don't count. You are bound to stay with Rushington, that seems clear. You are the hardest case I have tried yet. Ha, ha! Well, if you should change your mind at any time, you have our address, and you know what we have offered to do for you. As to your refusal to give us any pointers about the Rushington show, for a consideration, of course we respect your scruples, though you have a deuced uncomfortable way of expressing them. We get the mitten from you all around, and that is all there is to it, but we aren't the sort to get in a huff over it, and a line from you at any time on any subject or with any kind of a proposition would be considered confidential.

"Meanwhile, little girl, take good care of yourself in this wicked old world, and don't have any hard feelings for 'Queer' Saunders, for he is bluff and hearty and all right.

Cordially yours,

"JOSEPH Q. SAUNDERS."

There was a warm glow around Phil's heart as he read that letter. Looking up, he saw Isabel peeping out at him from behind a curtain, and he made a dash for her, but she ran, sprang on to her horse, which had not been taken away by the groom, and rode out across the open plot where the tent was pitched.

There were some unlucky small boys outside who had not the money to buy tickets, and to them was now given a free exhibition of fancy riding by Isabel, the star, for she saw them, and straightway did her best for their pleasure, while Phil stood and observed her from the outside of the horse tent.

It was all just a playful freak on her part, being a show of her delight at having satisfied the doubts of Phil and at the same time having pleased him by her work. As she rode away across the open plain she looked back and laughed and kissed her hand to him in her most bewitching way.

"I have not half done that girl justice, I believe!" thought our hero as he returned to the big tent, where Eona was in the act of making her last bow to the seats.

He was in time to see once more that no performer in his ring received so much applause as the mysterious Eona. Once more he saw the pallor of her face relieved by a faint flush which rendered her strangely attractive, in spite of the fact that she did not have perfect features.

"I have the most fascinating female riders that can be found in any circus ring in this country, of that I am sure," said Phil to Walt a little later, as the big crowd was going out of the tent.

"There isn't a doubt of it, Phil."

"By the way, I have given Isabel her letter, and it is all right. She let me read it, and she would not object to my telling you that it is an answer to one from her that refused to consider offers of Joseph Q. Saunders in the interest of the circus that he represents. It is evident that she did not even treat his offers with courtesy, which shows that she is true to our interests."

"I'm glad so much is cleared up. Did you ask her what Melton was saying to her?"

"No. I thought that I had better not appear suspicious after she had been so frank with me."

Walt fidgeted with his watch chain, and looked far from satisfied.

"You might have just asked her about him," he muttered.

"Why not ask him?"

"That is what I did just now."

"Ah! And what did he say?"

"He acted pretty well cut up first, and then he got angry and asked me out to fight. When I refused he hit me with the back of his hand. See my cheek? It hurts yet!"

"Melton did that! Well, of course you knocked him down!"

"Of course I did," grinned Walt. "First time I've done that trick by anybody since I left Springvale. It makes me feel queer. Guess I was mad."

"Shouldn't wonder, Walt. Good for you, anyhow. But does that end it?"

"He wants to fight me in the big tent after the crowd has gone out. I told him you wouldn't allow it, probably. Pleased to accommodate him only for that."

The face of Phil showed conflicting emotions. He knew that it would be establishing a bad precedent to allow a fight between different members of his company. It was true that he did not know of another man in the lot who would have picked a quarrel in that way, and it was something that he might always exercise the veto power on.

"How do you feel about it, Walt?" he asked.

"Sore on the cheek. But I am no fighter. There was time when I would rather run than fight, but now I feel as if I ought not to turn t'other cheek to the ruffian."

"You are developing up good, Walt, and I'm proud of you. You know I do not always look for a fight, but I despise a young fellow who would run from trouble at all times, and never came for seeing or hearing about a healthy knockout."

"What do you say about this affair, Phil? I would rather not do it, but Melton was nasty in the way he hit me, and I have an idea that he will do something worse if he isn't given a lesson in some way. You might go and ask the same question that I did, I suppose, and he would have to take it from you. And you can forbid the fight."

"The result would be that he would think you asked me to shut off the affair because you were afraid to face it. If we were not chums it would be different. No, it

looks as if I would have to let you and Melton try which can stand up the longest."

"All right," Walt yawned. "I'll have to ask you to tell him, Phil, as a matter of dignity, and I suppose the quicker we are about it the better. The girls mustn't know, if it can be kept from them, and the smaller the crowd that witnesses the affair the better I will be suited."

"It shall begin as soon as the tent can be cleared of the spectators. I will see that there is fair play."

"Can it not be managed so that the property men and as many as possible of the others are out of the big tent? If it could be kept a secret until it is over with, then outside talk would be avoided. It mustn't get around the town before the evening performance."

"I will do the best I can. How about Melton? You used to know how to handle your fists; but there is always a chance of running up against something hefty, you know."

"If it is too hefty, Phil, down goes your chum, that's all."

"And I will have to finish him up for you on a future date in that case—or would do it if I wasn't the boss showman," said the young circus owner, compressing his lips in a way which Walt had seen more than once in the old Springvale days.

"Remember what John Grayson said the time you knocked out Denton?"

"Yes. It was, 'Never fight again with a boy.' And

I never have. Melton is old enough, though—twenty-five, if he is a day.”

“All of that.”

The tent was being fast cleared, and Phil went in to see how soon the last of the people could be gotten rid of. He spoke to the ringmaster and asked him to clear the boys out if any lingered after the departure of the elders. Then he sought the foreman of the canvas and property men and told him to see that none of his gang entered the big tent within a certain space of time. Nearly all were asleep at that hour, and all would have to eat before the close of the evening performance.

The riders, acrobats and other performers would have their supper within an hour, and that would keep them busy. For Melton to slip out and join Walt in the big tent unobserved promised to be a feat of no great difficulty. Rushington saw Melton last. The fellow had just washed the red and black streaks from his face, but still wore his tights. He was naturally red in face, with white eyebrows and lashes, light hair and eyes of the palest blue. He was tall and of a good build, and in acrobatic feats he was the best man in Rushington ring.

His proficiency in this respect enabled him to do the most difficult tricks of the regular performers as a surprise after pretended trials and failures. This pleased the boys, and in all respects Phil Rushington considered the fellow one of his most valuable men.

Our hero had early discovered one fault with him. That was a liking for liquor. He had never known him to be intoxicated, or in the least unfitted for his duties in

the ring, therefore he had no pretext for finding fault with him in that respect.

“Mr. Melton,” said Rushington, in his most dignified tones, “I understand that you and Mr. Arkwright have been having trouble.”

“If you have his side of the story, of course there is no use of my saying anything, for it is probably a settled thing between you. If you have my walking ticket filled out I will have to take it.”

The young man seemed to have a bitter feeling about the affair, as if he had made up his mind that there would be no chance of his obtaining justice at the hands of the bosom friend of his opponent.

“You are mistaken, Melton. Mr. Arkwright says you wished to settle the affair with him in stand-up fashion, under the ordinary rules. I have consented, but the matter must be kept quiet.”

Melton stared at Rushington incredulously.

CHAPTER XV.

THE FIGHT.

“Do you mean to say that you will allow a fight with fists to take place between two members of your company?” Melton exclaimed.

“If you are disposed to let the matter drop where it is I should be pleased, of course. But I was given to understand that you would not be satisfied to let it end that way.”

“I challenged Arkwright fairly enough, but I thought that it would have to be managed without your knowledge or consent if it came off at all.”

“Mr. Arkwright would not have engaged in anything of the kind without my knowledge.”

“Honest boy!” sneered Melton.

“He is that.”

“Oh, well, if you have got to know about it, when did you propose to have it take place?”

“Now—at once.”

Melton hesitated. It seemed to him that they were in almost too great haste to have the affair take place. But there seemed to be no good excuse for delay, so he said, after a moment's consideration:

“I really have no one on whom I can depend to see me through this business. There is Barrows, the other clown. We are no great friends, but he is the sort to see fair play, I think.”

"He would see fair play all right. Will you confer with him?"

"Yes. And I suppose he will have to confer with you as Arkwright's second?"

"Mr. Grout, the ringmaster, will act for Arkwright. I must have no part in it, for reasons that you will understand."

"Honest boy and scrupulous chum!" muttered Melton.

"Is this all you will have me do for you, Mr. Melton?"

"That is all. Much obliged. Stay—any spectators to be admitted?"

"Just enough to see fair play, that is all."

"There is one person I would especially like to have witness the fight. But you will probably object."

"Who is it?"

"Eona!"

Phil stared.

"She wouldn't wish to see it!" he exclaimed.

"I think nothing would please her more."

"Do you know her?"

"A little."

"Why do you think she would care to witness the fight betwixt you and Arkwright?"

"She might not care to have me explain. I'm not going to tell everything I know. I'm not obliged to do it—see?"

"You need not. I will see Eona, and if what she says leads me to think that she would like to see the encounter I will let her come in. But it is a rather queer request to

make for a girl. The whole proceeding is rather queer, at best."

Rushington found Eona reclining languidly on a blanket. Isabel and Mamie were not in that tent, and the mysterious pale rider was alone. She looked up wearily as Phil came in.

"You didn't have me go out a second time when the people called for me to-day," she said, in her low tones.

"You worked hard enough in the first place, and gave more than the schedule calls for. You don't seem to me to enjoy the best of health."

"I am well."

"Doesn't the riding, with all the feats performed, weary you?"

"A little. But I am soon rested again. I could do twice as much. I am never more comfortable than I am when on the back of a good horse."

"'Girl Centaur' fits your quality pretty good, I think."

"I am always at ease on the back of a horse. I would die if I had to give up riding."

"You are a beautiful rider, Eona. By the way, I have a queer question to ask you."

"What is it?"

"Do you know anything about athletics, as practiced by boys in gymnasiums, and in some institutions by girls as well?"

"I have had a good gymnasimu training," said the pale girl, with her rare smile.

"Running, ladder-climbing, hand-over-hand—all those things?"

"All of those things."

"Fencing with foils, boxing with gloves?"

"Yes. And I enjoyed them all."

The girl got up, and her cheeks glowed.

"In the gym. where I trained there were lively times," she exclaimed.

"Of what kind?"

"There were two sets of girls, and they were jealous of each other's proficiency with the foils and the gloves. There were two of them who grew to hate each other, and it ended in a challenge and a fierce fight with gloves. It was dreadful, but only a few knew about it. I—I acted as referee!"

Phil Rushington stared. Here, indeed, was a glimpse into the past of this mysterious girl whose riding so fascinated all beholders. And Melton must have known something of the incident of which she had just spoken.

"You are a different sort of girl from what I thought you were."

"And you are disgusted?"

"No. I am merely surprised. You know the rules, then?"

"I was assistant teacher of the art of self-defense in the same school for one term after I got through as a pupil."

In a few words, Rushington told her of the impending encounter between Melton and Walt Arkwright.

"Too bad! Better advise Mr. Arkwright to settle the matter in some other way. Melton will kill him!"

"What do you mean?"

"Melton's father was instructor in the gymnasium, and the father trained the son in every way to develop his strength and skill from childhood. I have heard it said that few men could stand up before Carl Melton."

Eona evinced more excitement than Phil had ever seen her display before. For a moment he, too, regretted that Walt had become involved with the fellow. But he then remembered that his chum had a splendid training, that he was cool, that, with all of his seeming delicacy, his strength and endurance were of the highest quality.

At the same time he thought of another phase of the question. If Arkwright was vanquished in the encounter then he himself would give Melton the deserved lesson.

There was a strange tingle in the young showman's fingers at the thought. Somehow, Melton was singularly odious to Phil in every way, and he had become more so day by day, although Rushington could not have explained why.

"I think Walt will be able to take care of himself, and perhaps it will be Melton who will get tired first."

"If you know Mr. Arkwright's quality then you know how much risk he is running. From what I have seen of your friend, I judge that he would act with perfect fairness in any case."

"Fair play is all Walt asks for."

Eona was silent a moment, and it was evident that there was something more that she wished to say, but was doubtful as to the propriety of speaking all that was on her mind.

"How about fair play on the part of Melton?" Phil

asked, divining an inkling of what was in the mind of the girl.

"He will be fair if he can win by that means."

"And if he cannot?"

"I like you and your friend, and I am under no obligations to Carl Melton, so I will keep nothing back. If he finds himself getting the worst of the encounter, look out for fouls!"

"Thank you, Eona. And that brings me to a somewhat singular request made by Melton. It was that you have an opportunity to witness the encounter. He thought you would like to do it, but I was doubtful about it. All I will say is, that you are at liberty, if you are so inclined."

The girl compressed her lips with an expression which Phil had not seen on her lips before. She met his gaze frankly as she said:

"You would think less of me if I were to say that I would like to see the encounter?"

"No."

"Then I will witness it. It is to be when?"

"Within an hour, on the tanbark in the big tent."

"I will be there, but I don't care to be seen."

"Very well."

Rushington had to inform Barrows that Melton had chosen him to act as his second in the fight, and to tell Walt of the details and the moment when he would be expected to appear. Grout had already been informed of the part he was expected to play.

The preparations went on hurriedly, for it was im-

portant that it be finished in good season, and that not a whisper of it should leak out before the evening performance, as it might have a demoralizing effect on the other performers in the ring.

Both Barrows and Melton were clowns, and they had not been on the best of terms. It was not with the best grace, therefore, that Barrows accepted the commission to act as the second of the other.

"If I had been asked to act for Arkwright there would have been some sense in it, for he is a prime fellow," was his comment.

"It was Melton's request, and I give it to you as I got it. Perhaps, since you and Melton are not the best of friends, you can arrange with Grout to exchange places. I know Arkwright would not care, and I think Grout is indifferent."

"I'll speak to Melton about it, and we'll be ready on some basis in fifteen minutes. But you, Rushington, will witness the fight?"

Our hero made no reply. But when the adversaries were conducted to their places on the tanbark, Phil Rushington was an eager observer.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE END OF IT.

Melton and Arkwright faced each other and shook hands with a seeming good grace which created a favorable impression, for it at least indicated that neither of them was inclined to let ill feeling impair his coolness or courtesy.

Melton wore his tights, as for the regular performance. His arms were bare, and they were the arms of an athlete, as all could see. He was not handsome in face, but there was a supple grace in his movements which indicated what was true—that he had all his life been under training, and that he possessed natural good health.

It was a fact that he had formed a habit of using stimulants, but so far as Rushington knew, he had been moderate in the vice so far, and his physique was not yet impaired appreciably.

Arkwright was slender in build, with a delicate face which would lead the stranger to believe that he was inferior as an athlete. But his arms, of milk-like whiteness, were as large and muscular as Melton's, and there was quiet confidence in his manner which would not have been expected in one with his somewhat effeminate face.

There was one fault with Walt—he had all his life preferred to spend too many of his leisure hours in the society of women and girls. Now it should not be un-

derstood that girls are rated as unsuitable companions for a youth, for such is not the case. If they are of the right character their influence is always refining, and they draw out the chivalry and unselfishness of a boy's nature.

But, nevertheless, it is better for any boy to look upon the other sex as a luxury in friendship, not to be sought too constantly, however beautiful, true or good. The boy is to become a man, and the man must fight the battles of the world of every kind, and he must have muscles and brain hardened for the work. He must guard against effeminacy. He should win the admiration of his girl friends by his manly force, his strength, his willingness to meet hardship, to kick obstacles out of the way, to win battles in war, if necessary, but preferably, in youth, on the diamond, with oar or his own supple limbs in a race, or in a football eleven.

In such conquests as he may make in those fields he may at the same time be magnanimous and considerate, and for lessons in these and other refined virtues he will learn to look to the girl friend who observes his victories and defeats with delight in the former and sympathy in the latter.

Walt had not been so much inclined toward the triumphs in hardy sport as were some. Phil was his opposite in this respect. But Walt had good health, and he had taken an excellent course of training, and Melton was to find that he had something to do.

Grout and Barrows had made an exchange in their offices, and the latter stood as the second for Walt. Bar-

rows was a slender, eely fellow, with a face which seemed to be full of sadness, but who, in reality, had never been known to take anything seriously in his life.

"Wait a minute, Arkwright!" Barrows whispered, as they were about to take their places ready for the signal to begin.

"What is it, Barrows?"

"Let me get a basket," said Barrows.

"What do we want of a basket?"

"To save the pieces in!"

"Shut up!" cried Walt, although a smile flickered across his face.

The jest helped him, for he actually hated to try to blacken the eye of his adversary, and he would almost have been willing to apologize if by so doing the fight could have been avoided. And this was not because he was afraid of being hurt, either.

The jest made the matter seem less serious to him, and the next moment, when the word was given by Rushington, Walt opened the game by landing a left-hander squarely on the cheek of his opponent.

Melton was sent reeling back against the rope, but he did not go down. The clip came with a suddenness that took him by surprise, for he had calculated on making the first pass himself. He reckoned on Walt standing on the defensive. In truth, Melton believed that he had a "soft thing" in front of him, and that all he would have to do would be to brush it out of the way whenever he was ready.

Melton came back and tried to pay for the hit before

the end of the first round. But he only succeeded in keeping Walt busy until time was called, without landing a single blow.

It was not a good showing, and Melton felt that he must do better, and that right away, or they would begin to laugh at him. Still, he held his temper, and when they began again Walt did not succeed in landing anything, and he received a back-hand blow on the right ear that caused him to hear a jingle of sounds like bells.

After that both of the combatants warmed up to the work and at the end of the second round both began to look as if they had been in a fight. Yet neither of them had gained the least advantage. But they were enough hurt to feel angry at each other, and when they went at it again the affair came down to straight slugging, and each was sent to the earth once.

Melton went down last, and he got up slowly while Phil was counting the time. When he once more faced his slender antagonist he was less anxious to begin the sparring than he had been at the start. The truth was, his face was getting so bruised and painful that he dreaded having to stand up longer before Walt's stinging blows.

Walt was sore, too, and it was here that the one who looked the tenderest proved himself to be the nerviest. He did not shrink from the possible punishment, but walked up as if he were anxious to take it and have it over with.

He got hit once, and the pain went to his brain. From that moment Melton had no chance to shriek or to dodge,

for some hard fists were knocking for admittance on chest, head and shoulders, and he could not seem to get away from them. Melton breathed hard, and he became so blind with pain that he lost discretion and plunged in without appearing to care for consequences.

Rushington could see that Melton, with all his training, was in reality only expert in a few tricks which helped him to land blows at the beginning of the fight, before the other learned his style, and that as soon as his opponent found what those tricks were there was no trouble in meeting them.

It was here, too, that the perfect habits of Walt told in his favor. Even a moderate use of liquor, except in particular cases, is bound to tell on the power of endurance, and Melton had been drinking steadily for many years, while Walt was always temperate.

Melton went down thrice in a single round, and the last time he rose it was only to stagger against the rope and whine like a whipped spaniel. Grout would have tried to brace him up for more of the struggle, but Rushington stepped to the side of the ringmaster and said:

"This must go no further. This isn't a prize ring, and I will not have the affair go beyond the brutal point. Arkwright has won on points, and he mustn't strike Melton again, for he hits him now every time, and your man mustn't think that he can keep the thing going just because he is game."

"That's right—that's right!" said Grout.

At the same time Phil saw Eona step into the big tent

from beyond the flap that separated it from a dressing-room.

"Come, Melton," she exclaimed, going up to the fellow and laying a hand on his shoulder. "There must be some game that you can play better than this, and you should never again pretend that you know how to take care of yourself."

He stared at her, and a low exclamation escaped his lips.

"Did you see—it all?" he faltered.

"I saw it all. You thought to show off before me, but I have been laughing at you since the first because you didn't know when you were beaten. You have won no glory, and you look as if you had been through an explosion of some kind. And good enough for you!"

With that the strange girl returned to the dressing-room, sending one of her queer smiles back at Phil as she disappeared.

Her words, spoken before the one who had vanquished him, stung Melton worse than the blows had done. His face grew black with rage, and there was an expression in his eyes which our hero had never seen except in the eyes of one who was capable of being a villain.

Grout was trying to lead Melton from the tent, and Barrows joked and laughed while he attended to Walt. But Melton was hoarsely muttering threats, and refusing to accept of the kind offices of his second. Phil spoke in a low tone to Arkwright, and then went over to Melton.

"Enough of this, Melton," he said, firmly. "You are excused from duty for to-night, and you had better be

taken care of and then sleep. I shall never allow anything of this kind again between members of my company, and I should not have done so this time had I supposed that it was to be a brutal show, instead of a sparring for points. I thought you were a gentleman, and I knew Arkwright was one. Go soothe your bruises, and don't quarrel again while you are with this show!"

Rushington's sternness for a moment quelled the rage of the vanquished clown. Without a word, he allowed Grout to lead him out of the tent. But as he went he looked back, and the young circus owner was almost startled by the black malignity of his glance.

"It is a bad business, and if I had been sensible I would never have allowed it to be," was the thought of the young showman. "It is in such matters of judgment that a fellow shows the boy that is in him! Well, I'm learning, and I'll profit by the lessons."

In the smaller tent a girl sat beside Melton and bathed his swollen face with tender touch. As the tent filled for the evening performance she remained at his side.

It was Isabel!

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PERIL OF ISABEL.

"Well, old man, how do you feel?"

It was Phil who asked the question, and of course Walt was the object of his solicitude. Arkwright had taken a sponge bath, made a change of clothing, and looked almost as natty as ever. There were some bruises that did not improve the classical outlines of his face; but suitable treatment was making them look better, and if he suffered any from the thumps received he said nothing about it.

"I feel as if I needed something to do," was his answer.

"You don't look quite well enough to appear in the ring in too prominent a *rôle*. But in the evening you will do if you really feel like it. How about the 'fox and geese' on tight ropes? Can you do it, or is your head in too buzzy a condition?"

"I can do that all right."

"Very well. It might be a good thing for you to go out, just to silence rumors which will probably leak out about the affair with Melton. It would show that you were not the one who had to drop out of it."

"That's right, and I'm ready for anything that has a goose in it, for I feel as if I had been playing in that *rôle* already."

"Fighting is foolish business, Arkwright, but there are things that are more foolish for a young fellow, to my

mind. It keeps a man from getting soft, and that is something. But have you looked into the tent to see how she is filling up for the evening show?"

"Rather light, I am afraid. It is hot and—— Hear that!"

They could hear without listening intently. It was the rumble of thunder, and it was so heavy that the ground shook under their feet. Then they noticed that the darkness which was falling was of a blacker sort than that which belonged to the twilight hour, and that the darkness was frequently lighted by vivid flashes of lightning.

"A thunderstorm," said Phil. "And it looks as if it might be a lively one. But that is something that we will have to run up against at this time of year, and this is the time of year for the circus business, anyway. I suppose it is bound to give us a light crowd, coming just before the opening of the show. I'll take a look at the sky, to see if it is of the kind to scare the timid."

Both went out to the door of the small tent, and as they did so there was another flash, more vivid than any of the others, followed closely by a crash of thunder. They involuntarily drew back, for it seemed as if the tent was filled with flame. But the next moment the scene was swallowed up in the blackest kind of darkness.

"It is a bad one, and nobody but the boys who would go through a cyclone to get to a circus tent will venture out. We have been lucky so far about not having an exhibition spoiled by a storm, and I suppose we have no right to complain."

Walt went into the big tent. That few people were

present or likely to come was evident, for it was time for the seats to be filling up.

"Not half a crowd, Rushington," said Grout.

"The show will have to be given just the same, for the few that are here will advertise us for the next town. Some stay away when a storm threatens, because they think half the show will be dropped. The story must go out that we do everything we advertise, even if there is only one boy and nobody else on the benches."

"That's what Mossman used to say," Grout answered. "But it isn't every showman that goes on those lines. Some would hand the money back to the handful of people who are here and tell them to get in out of the wet."

"They came in spite of the threatened storm, and they of all people should not be disappointed. Give the full show, only cutting off a little of the time given to some of the tricks, so as to give them a chance to go home in case there is a lull in the storm."

"All right."

A minute afterward the band struck up its noisiest, but a clap of thunder for the moment crashed so loudly that the sounds were drowned. Then out came the trapeze performers, the clown with his donkey, and so on through the first features of the show.

Then the male trick rider, with his four horses which he rode as an ordinary person rides one, and the tight ropes and "fox-and-geese" game, in which Walt, Phil, Mamie, the Irish girl performer and rider, and, this time, Eona, ran about on the network of ropes far above the

tanbark in what seemed to be a merry frolic without fear of a fall.

Isabel usually took part in the game. But this time she did not appear, and Phil wondered if she were afraid on account of the storm.

Vivid lightning, the gleams of which showed even in the tent, the terrific thunder, lent a weirdness to the scene which rendered the performance all the more thrilling to the few who had braved the weather for the sake of seeing it.

Then it was time for Isabel, the star rider, to appear. Instead, Mamie dashed into the ring with her impudent little nag, and set the people in a roar with her antics, while they applauded her dash and daring.

“Where is Isabel?”

Phil asked the question, and made his way to the dressing-rooms for the answer. But she was not where he expected to find her.

He came last to the curtained alcove where Melton had been taken after the fight with Arkwright. He paused there as he heard the sound of voices just beyond the curtain.

One speaker was Melton, and he spoke in such a low, growling tone that our hero could not make out what he said. Then the voice of Isabel was heard.

She was crying—her tones were pleading—they were almost terrified in their accents.

“Don’t tell him! Don’t tell him!” Phil heard her say. “I will do anything—anything—rather than have you do that!”

The brain of Rushington reeled. What did it mean? Again rose the old question as to the secret of Isabel, his star rider, for whom he had done so much, for whom he had hoped so much.

Phil was one to think a great deal of his friends. He was inclined to trust them fully, to believe them to be as frank and sincere in all things as he was himself. He was not of a suspicious nature, and anything of a questionable character concerning one in whom he had confidence brought to him a feeling of the most intense depression.

What was the secret of Isabel? Several times had he found evidence that there was a secret, and that with all her professed confidence in him she did not have the courage to tell him of it. Now it seemed to be clear that Melton, the most unworthy man connected with the show, knew something of Isabel's secret—that he was more fully in her confidence, apparently, than was Phil Rushington, who had befriended her when she was most in need.

Phil could hear the band as it struck into the piece which it usually played for the entrance of his star. He knew that Mamie was still in the ring, and that Grout would see that the place of Isabel was filled by Eona if the other failed to appear promptly. There was not a great crowd to be disappointed if Isabel did not appear at all, and it was not for that that he cared. But the terrible question as to her reason for failing him was a haunting one that he could not get rid of.

He was tempted to step in where Isabel and Melton

were talking. But to do so he knew would be a great shock to her, and still regarding her in the light of a friend, he felt that he had no right to intrude in that way.

"No," he thought. "If she will trust me with the matter, if I can induce her to do so, well and good; if not, I will not play the eavesdropper or try to force the secret from her lips. But why does she neglect her duties? Does she not know that her turn has come to ride? She is shirking her work, and I will have to inquire the reason of that."

He heard Melton walking about, and that proved that the clown was not so badly off from his fight with Arkwright as Phil had supposed. Again he heard the growling tones of the fellow, and he caught several disconnected words, one of which was the name of Rushington. But he could make no sense of them, and he was not in a mood to listen for the sake of finding out the reason in that way.

There were no lights in the place where Rushington was standing at the moment, but he could see that there was a light on the other side of the flap in the compartment where Melton and Isabel were. But the frequent flashes of lightning made him uncertain even of that.

Suddenly the sound of voices ceased. Phil still lingered, not for the purpose of listening, but because he could not decide at the moment what to do. It was then that there came an unusually brilliant flash of lightning, and when he could see clearly again, to his consternation

he saw that the flap of canvas had been drawn aside, and that Melton was facing him in the opening.

"Listening, eh?" exclaimed the clown.

"No. I came to find Isabel. It is time for her to ride," Phil answered.

There was a low cry from the girl, and the next moment she flew past him and sped away in the direction of the horse tent.

"Melton," said Phil, as the clown still faced him with a disagreeable expression on his swollen face. "I have been here for a minute or two, and I heard a few words spoken by Isabel. I did not come here expecting to find her, and I am not going to ask any questions. But you will find it to your interest, in due course of time, to explain some matters. I do not know, of course, whether it was her fault or yours that she did not report promptly for duty, but such matters will have to be made satisfactory to me, whoever may be responsible."

"I could explain without cost to me," said Melton, in a disagreeable tone.

"I dare say you could tell any kind of a story, and make it appear that you were innocent as a lamb. But when I obtain a version of the affair I shall make an effort to see that it shields nobody. Now, if you are as much the worse for your fight with Arkwright as you appeared when they took you out of the ring, I advise you to go to sleep and make the most of the time, for I shall expect to see you ready for duty again to-morrow."

Rushington turned to go, but Melton seized his arm.

"Stay," he said.

“What is it?”

“There is a detective in one of the dressing-rooms waiting to arrest your star rider. She will be taken at the close of this performance!”

Our hero fell back as if he had been struck in the face.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TENT ON FIRE.

"I don't believe it!"

Such was the response of Phil to the declaration of Melton, the clown.

"You are not obliged to," sneered Melton.

"How do you know there is an officer here to arrest anybody?" Phil demanded.

"I knew one was following us, and to-day I saw him."

"At what time did you see him?"

"At the afternoon performance. He was in the audience, trying to make out for certain if she was the one he wanted."

"How did you know that?"

"Because he accosted me once when I stood close to the rope, and nobody else was within hearing."

"He asked you which of the riders was Isabel?"

"Yes."

"That explains only a part of your share in it. How did you know that he was an officer?"

"I tell you I knew there was one following the show after somebody. I saw him arrest a man in New York more than a year ago and I recognized him."

"You told him which one of the riders was Isabel when he asked you to-day?"

"Yes."

"Was it about that that you whispered to her this afternoon in the ring?"

"I asked her if she knew that man who spoke to me. She said that she did not, and then she tried to get me to tell her what he said to me, and I told her that I would do so before the evening performance."

"And that was why she came in to see you after the fight, and it was about that that you were both talking?"

"It was about that."

"Then she knows now that the officer is waiting for her?"

"She knows."

Phil was silent while Melton observed him curiously in the dim light. Then, in a changed tone, our hero said:

"You had better lie down for an hour, Melton, and get straightened out ready for the journey. The performance is about over, but we shall not take down the tent until the storm slackens up, for it won't last long. You need rest. How is your face? pretty painful?"

"I shall grin and bear it, and you may say to Arkwright that I'm not dead yet, and he will be likely to hear from me again."

"There will be no more fighting between you while you remain in my show. He got the best of you squarely enough, and you must let that settle it for good and all. What is a little sparring, with an enlarged nose and a bruised jaw? You are the better for it, or would be, if you didn't cherish a foolish idea of getting your revenge for the punishment."

"His time will come, and his punishment with it!" said Melton, savagely.

"Come, Melton, don't hold on to a thing that way. It isn't worth while. It doesn't take courage to be quarrelsome, or to seek revenge. There is no use of trying to get even with everybody. It is not possible. We have our work to do, and to make a success of it is all the battle the most of us are able to fight successfully."

Melton listened to the kind words of Phil with downcast face, and it was evident that he cared nothing for them. It was impossible for him to feel that anybody could be right except himself, and for any hurt to another he cared nothing.

Phil's mind was full of what the clown had just told him concerning Isabel. He longed to learn more of the matter, but he did not like to discuss the affair with him.

"Why does anybody wish to arrest Isabel? What has she done? What can I do for her?"

Such were the queries that flashed through the mind of the young showman with bewildering swiftness. It brought to his brain a sense of confusion, and he was indifferent to the details of his business, even the things which it devolved upon him to attend to.

"Lie down, Melton, and get a nap if you can," he said at last, without half knowing what he was saying. Then he turned away, with a vague notion of seeking the officer and trying to make a money settlement of the difficulty, so that Isabel would not have to be arrested.

"Where did she go?" he suddenly asked himself.

He hastened back to the big tent, and as he did so Eona

dashed past him on her horse. She drew up as she saw him.

"Isabel didn't ride," she said, as though she knew what he would have asked.

"Where is she?"

"In the dressing-room, I think. She asked me to go out on her turn."

"I will tell her. But I think she will refuse to see you now. You had better wait, or you will drive her away."

"It is imperative that I see her at once, for something must be done. Do you know, Eona, what is the trouble?"

"I know that an officer is lying in wait for her, and that she will not be allowed to leave this town."

"Do you know what the charge is against her?"

"Melton knows. Ask him."

"I asked if you knew."

"I do not. If I have any suspicions I am not obliged to say what they are."

"You are not expected to utter suspicions. All I wish to know for is that I may be able to do what is needed for her. A public scandal must be avoided if it can be, and the girl must be protected. I do not believe she is guilty of anything worthy of all the trouble that is being made over it. She has enemies—has been indiscreet about something—there may be a dozen reasons for the annoyance without calling her innocence in question."

"Oh, yes," said Eona. But the odd smile with which the words were spoken sent a deeper dread to the heart of the young circus owner.

The storm which had threatened with such intensity seemed to be holding back. There was a steady patter of rain, a grumble of thunder, a red flare of lightning against the black sky, but it seemed more distant, and as the last act in the ring was in progress it seemed probable that the people would have a chance to get home without facing anything severe.

But, suddenly, there came a lurid flare that seemed to fill the tent with flame, and there was a simultaneous crash of thunder, followed by outcries, shouts, the trumpeting of an elephant, cries of whining terror from the other animals, all the sounds and signs of panic.

For the moment Rushington could not tell that anything startling had really happened. But then he realized that the lights in the big tent had been extinguished, and that the people were scrambling down over the seats in the darkness, while there was another flash, redder, more continuous than the other—a flash that became a lurid glare growing more vivid each second, while the cries from the people took a more coherent form.

“Fire! the tent—on fire!”

That was the cry, and the bewilderment of Phil was over. His presence of mind returned. Eona, on her horse, had dashed out at the exit, and was already clear of the tents. A glance showed him that the tent had been struck near the main entrance, and that a section of the canvas was in flames.

In an instant he was among his canvasmen, rousing them to action. Accustomed as they were to rapid work,

his orders sent them to the task like men ordered into battle.

"Furl up the front section, quick!" he ordered. "We can save the rest of it, if we are quick enough. And the people—here, here!"

Several women and boys had tried to make their exit by way of the main entrance, but a tongue of flame flapped almost in their faces, driving them back. Then there was a dash in the opposite direction, and but for Rush they would have been in among the horses, now frantic with fright.

He stopped them. A boy of ten would have been trampled to death under the hoofs of the horses, but Phil caught and lifted him clear, and with the lad in his strong arms he cried to the panic-stricken knot of people who, seeing no way clear for escape, stood dazed and helpless.

"Follow me, and keep cool! There is no danger, for the crowd is small. Come this way!"

His voice rang above the sounds of tumult in the tents, and yet there was such reassuring calmness in it that the excitement was in a measure quelled. They followed at his heels, and in another moment he had them out of the stifling tent where the cool rain was falling in a torrent, and the lightning flashing against the inky clouds, with the thunder booming like a battle close at hand.

He gave the child over to the care of an older brother, and dashed back into the tent. As he did so he nearly collided with a stout, red-faced man who caught at his arm to detain him.

"Where is that girl, Mr. Rushington?"

The man spoke in a gruff voice, and his keen eyes looked searchingly into Phil's.

"What girl?" was the retort. And yet, in his heart, Phil knew who was meant.

"Isabel, the star rider."

"I don't know where she is."

"Why didn't she ride to-night?"

"That is a question I can answer no better than I can the other. I suppose, however, that she is in the dressing-room, or that she was there before the alarm of fire was sounded."

The officer smiled grimly.

"I looked out for that, young man. When she did not appear according to the schedule I was investigating the dressing-room myself. She had gone from there. I was told that she was with you."

"Who told you so?"

"A young man with a face that looked as if he had been fooling with a bombshell."

"Melton, the clown! So he told you that, did he! Well, it is a falsehood. I have seen Isabel to-night, but not to talk with her, and when I saw her she had just left Melton. Go back and question him if you want to know more. I've got my hands about full now."

Phil tried to throw off the grasp of the officer, but it clung, and the man said:

"If you connive at that girl's escape you will be held responsible. Bear that in mind."

"But you will not succeed in scaring anybody who isn't afraid of you—bear that in mind!" Phil sharply retorted.

The officer went out of the tent to look out for suspects among the departing and hurrying forms. And Rushington plunged back into the darkness and stifling smoke within the big tent.

As he groped his way another electric flash lit up the space, and he saw some one crouching underneath one of the seats close to the rope.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE FLIGHT.

It was Isabel. At first the young circus owner thought her dead—that she had tried to find her way from the tent in the darkness and that she had fallen from one of the higher seats, or, possibly, that she had become stifled by the smoke.

The canvasmen had already furled up the section of the tent which was on fire, and the rain, driving in in a torrent, deluged everything. Had it been a building of wood, the rain would not have extinguished the flames so easily. But the canvas became drenched almost instantly, and it was damp on the outside to begin with.

At no time had the rain fallen more heavily than when Phil went back into the tent. Men and horses were dragging the cages forth, and the work of taking down the seats had begun. Lights swung aloft, and the wind was clearing away the smoke, as the sides of the tent were furled.

Rushington bent over the crouching form of Isabel. Her face was covered by her hands, and she was perfectly still. He took hold of her arm gently, and he was thrilled with the delight of relieved fear when she stirred and uttered a sound like a sob. But she did not raise her head.

“Isabel, we are breaking up,” he said, in a low voice.

"Leave me here," she answered, still with her face covered.

"That can't be. It is raining a torrent. Come and be ready to go with us."

"You know that I cannot go with you. You know that I shall be followed and arrested before I can get out of the town. Leave me here and I will try and take care of myself. I will not have him take me. I am not the one who did it, and I will never come to trial for it!"

The girl raised her head as she said this, and tried to rise to her feet. But Phil held her back.

"He went out of the tent only a moment ago, and he is likely to come back. If you deserve arrest, Isabel, I have no right to interfere to prevent it. If you are innocent of any crime, I will protect you. If you are guilty, I will still be your friend in need, and do everything that may be legally done in your behalf."

Phil spoke rapidly, in a low voice, and so earnestly and kindly that Isabel broke down and wept as passionately as a child. Phil's hands touched her hair softly.

"What is it, Isabel?" he asked.

"It is a long story, and I could not tell it now."

"With what are you charged?"

"With theft."

"Of what?"

"Money—a large sum. But I am innocent. I never took the money. I never took a penny that did not belong to me."

"Look at me, Isabel!"

She uncovered her face, and her eyes, full of tears, met

his gaze steadily. It was not the gaze that comes of a brazen resolution to face out a falsehood, but, if Phil Rushington could judge the truth, the girl star rider was honest then.

"If you are guilty, in ever so slight a degree, Isabel, do not hesitate to tell me," said Rushington.

"I am not guilty. If I were I would tell you, for I believe that you would still be my friend."

"I believe you. And if you are innocent, then you must not be permitted to suffer for it, if you can be protected. But we have not time here or now to talk it over. Come with me. I will see what can be done."

The girl arose obediently and allowed Phil to lead her across the tanbark to the smaller tent where all the horses had been taken.

The danger of the fire was over, unless the improbable event of the tent being struck again were to occur. One man was with the horses. In a little more than an hour the train which would take the circus from the town would leave, and it would take fast work to get the property loaded. The "jump" to the next town where they were to exhibit was a longer one than usual, and for that reason they must start earlier.

Our hero quickly found Isabel's horse. He ordered her saddle to be put on, and then accompanied the girl to the dressing-room entrance.

"Go and put on your long riding skirt," he said, "and send Mamie out to me. I wish to speak to her."

Isabel obeyed without a word.

Mamie had hardly seen Rush to speak to him that

day. Friends and playmates as they had been in childhood, and connected from the first with his two ventures as a showman, Mamie held a place in his confidence which was different from that of any member of his company. As the girl came out Walt joined them.

In a few words Phil told them of the danger of Isabel, and of what he wished to do for her.

"What do you think of it?" he asked, when he had finished.

Mamie was quick to speak.

"Oi don't belave the girl is a thafe, except of toime, and it is mostly from Walt that she has stolen toime, Oi'm thinking," said Mamie.

"If she told you squarely that she is innocent, Rush, I'm willing to abide in my judgment by yours," added Walt.

"What do you think I am justified in doing under the circumstances?"

"Let the officer get left. It would be good for the loikes of him. Didn't he come palavering around here this night and thry to hoire me to tell him how Isabel come to join this show, and where she come from, and if she is honest in her dalings while she was wid us, and if Oi hadn't missed some diamonds or money, that might be traced to her, and the loikes of that? Then he thried to chuck me under the chin wid one of his stumpy fingers, and Oi snapped at it wid me teeth, and made him jump back and swear. That is the koind of man he is. And would Oi help him? Oi would not. Oi'd help him to get in the soup, and that is all!"

"If he behaved in that manner, then it decides me against him. If Isabel is accountable for anything, I can do nothing for her except in her defense after her arrest. But I will not see her arrested and made trouble over a trumped-up charge if I can help it. In the end, she will have to explain everything to me, but now there is not time, for all that is done will have to be done promptly."

"Oi'm ready for anny old thing that will get the best of the chump that took me to be so aisy."

"And I am ready to take a hand in the same game. Now I have done up a clown, I feel as if I could do the same service for a detective, if it comes in his line," said Walt.

"It will have to be by strategy, and the cleverest at that, and you may both help. I will stay with the show and accompany it to the next town. But you, Walt, may take a ride with Isabel. Here is my plan, and you must act in a hurry. Mamie will wear one of Isabel's costumes, and make up to look as much like her as she can. She will make some show of trying to keep shady, and if the officer is spying, he will follow us to the station and try there to arrest Mamie. That will give Isabel time to get out of the way on horseback. I want Walt to accompany her, and see that she gets into good quarters. Meanwhile, I will get at the truth of the matter and deal with the officer myself. If she is innocent, I don't believe there is any need of her going through the delay and worry of a trial. Of course, there is something back of it, but it is not necessarily against her."

"A good plan," said Walt.

"And Oi'll fool that chump to bate the car-rs!" exclaimed Mamie, as she danced away into the dressing-room.

Walt saw that the horses were ready for Isabel and himself, and at the same time he discussed the details of the proposed flight with Phil. The latter tarried only until Isabel came out, ready to go.

At first he thought it was Mamie, for her face was covered with a veil, and she wore the costume which Mamie wore in the street parade that day, which the officer must have observed.

But, behind the veil, our hero could see that there were tears and she could hardly control her voice to speak to him.

"I am ready," she said.

"I have instructed Walt to go with you, and to see that you find safe quarters. Meanwhile, I will see that everything possible is done to clear you of this matter. Will you tell me where it was that the charge was first brought against you?"

"It happened more than a year ago, in the city of Scranton."

"You were charged with the theft of money?"

"Of diamonds. But, Phil Rushington, as I live, I know nothing of the crime. I was told at the time that somebody had the jewels stolen, and it happened in a hotel where I happened to be stopping for the day."

"That would not have been sufficient evidence to implicate you, any more than it would the other guests in the house. What was the other evidence?"

"The stolen jewels were found with a pawnbroker in another city which I visited later, and the person who pawned them answered, in a general way, to my description."

"Is that all?"

"That is all, except——"

She hesitated.

"Come," said Phil, "don't waste time, and don't keep anything back."

"I found that I was being suspected and watched, and, fearing trouble, I consulted a lawyer. He advised me to 'keep shady.' So I left the city in a hurry, and that was all I could do about it. I think now that the lawyer thought I was guilty, and that the best way out of it for me was to keep out of the way until the affair blew over. It would have been better for me to have faced it then. But now my flight at that time will go against me with the other circumstances."

"That is so. And this flight will make it all the darker for you, and it rings me into it, besides. Now, once more, Isabel, if you have not told me the whole truth, do so, for it is worse for you to be untrue to a friend than it would have been for you to steal the valuables."

The girl's beautiful eyes once more met Rushington's frankly.

"I have told you the truth, and I am innocent of all knowledge of the stolen property. Please, please believe me, for I would rather suffer for the crime than to escape and have you feel that I was not true?"

"I will believe you. But I did not wish to have a

shadow of doubt left. What I do for you now may make trouble for me, and I wish to know that I am in the right."

"Rest assured, then, that you are in the right, and may Heaven bless you, my dear friend——"

"There, there, you must go. There is Walt with the horses. Mount and off with you!"

Their hands clasped, and by a quick, impulsive movement, Isabel bent toward him, and he felt the touch of her lips against his cheek. Then they mounted and rode away into the darkness.

CHAPTER XX.

MAMIE AND THE DETECTIVE.

Phil Rushington could feel the tremulous touch of Isabel's lips against his cheek long after she had disappeared with Walt in the darkness. He stood like one in a dream. He knew that he was doing for her what few would have done with nothing but her unsupported word as evidence in her favor. He recalled, now, with a sense of apprehension, various suspicious incidents which had occurred since Isabel had been connected with his circus.

Her explanation of this matter did not clear up the other, and, connecting them in his mind, he could not banish the fear that, after all, she might have deceived him in her anxiety to escape from the consequences.

"Not many have the courage to admit to their best friends that they have done a great wrong," was his thought. "And it is clear that she likes me as well as a best friend, at least. If she only might be certain that I would do her justice in any case. If I might only know, absolutely, the truth."

Phil turned to see to the business of breaking up, for there were instructions to be given. As he did so, he saw Melton dodge behind the flap of the space which he had been occupying since the fight with Walt Arkwright.

The glimpse he had of the man's face showed it to be black as a thundercloud.

"He has been listening and spying?" thought the young circus owner.

He bounded into the tent and caught Melton by the shoulder.

"You were watching!" he exclaimed.

"Well, what if I was?" was the retort.

"Don't you dare to betray Isabel Currier to the officer. That is all. Don't you dare to do it!"

"What would happen if I did?" sneered Melton.

"I would thrash you within an inch of your life! That is what."

The other drew back, and it was plain that the threat was not without an effect on his resolution. He had heard of Phil Rushington's exploits, and he had no inclination at that time to put him to any test.

"You—you would stand up for any girl that would give you such a sweet good-by, I dare say!" he muttered.

"Keep your mouth shut, Melton, and see that you do not rouse my anger, for I will surely do as I say!"

Melton slunk away without a word, and Rush went about the work which he had neglected.

The big tent was down, most of the property was loaded ready to be carted to the cars, and the cages and some of the teams were already on the road. Only the small tent, with the dressing-room, the compartment for the horses, etc., remained standing. These would be taken last.

Phil had hardly left the small tent before another figure came running into it. It was Clay, the officer who was on watch for Isabel. The man was out of breath, his

face was red as flame, and he burst in where Melton stood, still quaking from the encounter with Rushington.

"You promised not to let her give me the slip!" exclaimed Clay, furiously.

"Well, I let her wheedle me, and I was a fool to do it," said Melton.

"Where is she now? Tell me quick, or I'll have you over the coals for abetting her escape."

Melton hesitated. He could not so soon forget the threat of Phil Rushington, and he dreaded to brave the wrath of the young showman. It was true that he had given no pledge, but Phil would hold him to it just the same, he was sure of that.

"I can't tell you where she is, and that is the truth," he declared at last, as Clay stood over him, his hot breath in the young fellow's face.

"You can tell me which way she went."

"I don't even know that."

Clay caught the young man by the shoulder and shook him as a terrier would shake a rat.

"You are dodging the truth now, and you know it!"

"I am not dodging the truth, and you had better keep your hands off me."

"You promised to help me to take the girl, and now you have let her go right from under your eyes."

"She went with somebody else."

"With whom?"

"The chum of the manager of the show, Arkwright."

"How did they go?"

"Horseback."

"Very good! Now, where did they go?"

"That is more than I was able to find out. I listened to some of their talk, but could get only a part of it, and the part I lost was their destination. I could only guess at that."

This was true. So was the next statement made by Melton, the treacherous clown.

"Give me your guess, then," said Clay.

"I think there is an express train goes from this station before the circus train, and that they went to catch that."

"Likely enough. And when does the train go?"

Melton looked at his watch.

"I can't remember for certain, but I think it is due in five minutes."

"Then I'll catch it if I can on one of these horses. The man in charge must let me take one to pay for the interference of Rushington. If you have fooled me in this, look out for squalls when I return!"

Clay made a dash for the horse tent, where the man in charge was in the act of leading out the ring animals. He would have sprung upon the back of one of them, but the man—or youth, rather—held him back.

"What are you going to do!" exclaimed the fellow.

"I must catch that express at the station. Imperative. I'm an officer of the law!"

"Can't help it, if you're the president of the nation. I couldn't let you have that horse. It is a trick animal——"

"Well, so am I!" snapped Clay. And he let the youth have his burly fist between the eyes.

The youth was on his feet as soon as the man was on the horse, and in a flash a word was spoken to the steed. Then Clay found what it meant to mount a circus horse which had been taught obedience.

The horse "bucked," throwing heels in the air so that he almost stood on his head. The man landed on the grass, and all in a heap. The young fellow in charge drew the horses into a bunch, and then waited for Clay to get up and try something else.

Clay arose, but he tried no more circus horses. He saw one of them showing its teeth viciously, and he had a suspicion that the beast had instructions to take a mouthful from his shoulder. He did not wait to ask any questions, for he reasoned that there was a possibility of his reaching the station before the departure of the express, and he made a break for it on foot, using his legs for all they were worth.

The distance was not great. Mamie had already arrived there on her horse, and she had gone alone.

She had no intention of going on any train except that which would take the rest of the circus people. Her only object was to decoy the detective on a false scent, and to bother him in as many ways as possible, to give Isabel more time to get out of his way.

Clay came up to the station, puffing and perspiring. Mamie saw him coming, and stood beside her horse, a little way from the platform.

As he ran up, she made a hurried move as if she would

have mounted. But she allowed him to get ahead of her, and to seize her arm.

"Now, girl! Haven't I got you, eh?" he exclaimed, exultantly.

"Let go of me!" screamed Mamie, struggling.

"Well, I guess not, my beauty. Not this time. Come, must I put the twisters on to you? Great Goshen!"

Spat! fell Mamie's open palm on the man's cheek. It was no baby's pat, either, and as he staggered under it his cheek looked as if the blood might break through the skin.

He released his hold on her arm, and before he could recover it, the girl was on the back of her horse, and the latter was capering around the officer as lightly as an autumn leaf in a whirlwind.

"Come, my covey, and put up the dukes av yees for a foight if ye belave ye are good for wan!" taunted Mamie.

Clay tried to cut across the narrow circle made by the curveting horse, but the girl kept just beyond his reach, yet so close that he thought each moment that he would succeed in pulling her from the back of the animal.

Of course, she could keep as far away from him as she pleased, for her horse was obedient to every touch and word, and there were a score of surprising tricks of which the animal was capable if called upon to perform them.

But Mamie was not disposed to keep up the "picnic" a great while. The man was beside himself with rage already, and so exhausted by his violent exertions that he perspired from every pore.

Suddenly a revolver flashed out from a pocket, and he called out hoarsely :

“Stop, you vixen, or I’ll shoot !”

Mamie was not afraid of his shooting at her, but it occurred to her that he might wound the horse, and that was enough to make her more cautious.

She pulled up, and at the same time there was the clatter of another horseman approaching.

It was Phil Rushington.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TELEGRAM.

Clay saw the young showman at the same time that he was first observed by Mamie. He stepped up to the latter, still leveling his weapon.

"Come," he wheezed, "you have given me trouble enough. Get off of there or it will go hard with you!"

"And it has gone hard wid yourself, Oi'm thinking!" said Mamie. At the same time she flung up her veil, and sat with her face fully disclosed to the officer, smiling saucily down at him.

"Great Goshen!" gasped the man.

"Or anny other old thing!" chimed in the Irish girl.

Rushington rode up, cool and smiling, sitting his horse, as the bills said, "like Buffalo Bill."

"What has Mamie been doing, that you threaten to shoot her, may I ask?" exclaimed Phil.

"I—I thought it was the other."

"The other what?"

"You know what I mean. You have been tricking me, and I'll make it go hard——"

"Oh, of course you will," laughed Phil. "You are a great hand to make things go hard—with yourself. But you must not think that your story of wanting to arrest my star rider will go down with me. You are up to something else, and I'll have you pulled in, just for fun, to see what you mean by annoying the young ladies be-

longing to my show. The other one—Eona—says that you hung about her to-day, too, and accosted her. A fine old flame you are! Get out of the way!”

Clay fell back. Phil Rushington seemed to be very much in earnest. He reflected that he had made rather free in his manner of seeking information of the girl performers in the circus. Like many others, he assumed that no one who was respectable ever rode in a circus ring, and he thought that anything he might say to the circus girls would not be resented.

Having tried to chuck Mamie under the chin, and got his pay for it, he was not slow to recognize her now that her veil was lifted. He realized that it might put him in a bad light, for he had not acted the part of a dignified officer.

As a matter of fact, he was a private detective who had taken up the case for the reward there was in it, and he had thought to get ahead of one or two others who were on the same case.

There had been a thousand dollars offered for the recovery of the valuables, not because of their intrinsic value so much as that they were specially valued by the loser for other reasons.

This was worth working for, and Clay had gone in to win. He really believed that he was on the right track, but he had been told that the thief was a clever young professional female “crook,” and he was consequently more cautious and slow in the business than he would otherwise have been.

At heart, he was as unscrupulous as were many of the criminals whom he sought to entrap.

Having thus compromised himself in a degree by his own doubtful behavior, he was not so independent as to future action as he would otherwise have been.

"I—I thought this was the girl I wanted!" he stammered.

"You seem to want most any pretty girl that you get your eyes on. That yarn about stolen jewels is rather thin, and the thing for you to do now is to get out of the way. The Mossman & Rushington Circus people know their business, and they haven't any crooks in their employ. Get out of the way, I tell you!"

"Wait a moment!" said Clay, putting on the last of his dignity.

"And what must I wait for?"

"Here is my badge."

"Which is worth no more than a tobacco tag without special authority in the city or town where you try to use it."

"I have such authority here, granted twenty-four hours ago. The place has inadequate police protection, and they were glad enough to let me take the oath as a special officer without pay, to serve while this circus was in town, with the crooks that always follow such a show, when they don't actually belong to it."

This was a vicious hit, and the cheeks of Phil Rushington showed by their color that he had got through trying to treat the man with courtesy.

"Mamie," he said, to the girl who was observing and

listening, ready to take part whenever she might be called upon.

"Yes, sir-r."

"Did this man behave in a manner becoming an officer when he came to you to-day to make inquiries?"

"He did not, indade!"

"Would you be willing to take oath to it?"

"That Oi would, and there are other witnesses."

"Well, then, we'll have the matter looked into. I don't like the idea of the delay, but I will have him taken in hand to-night, and we can come back and testify in a day or two, for they will put over the hearing for that length of time, out of consideration for our business, which won't bear neglect."

Rushington seemed to be thoroughly angry, and he wheeled his horse as if he were determined to put his threat into immediate execution.

As a matter of fact, Clay was guilty of more indiscretion even than Phil dreamed of, and he knew that to be pulled into court would endanger a bringing up of a lot of evidence that would ruin his prospects, in that region at least. And he was at the same time on the track of another case that he hoped would yield him a good return.

To keep out of court as a defendant, therefore, was what he wished most of all things to do. He must do so at any cost.

"Hold on! hold on!" he cried.

"What is it?" our hero demanded.

"I'll admit that I didn't do just right when I spoke to

this girl. A man will act silly sometimes. I'm willing to make it right, if a little money will do it."

"Money won't do it," said Rushington.

"Why—why I didn't do or say anything much out of the way. Just a little fun, that is all. A man must have his joke."

"An officer mustn't have his joke when he is on duty, and you know it."

"It wasn't just right in me, I'll admit. And I have offered to make it right."

"With money. But money won't do it."

"What will, then?"

"Better behavior, or a pledge of it."

"I'll give that—glad to do it."

"And getting out of this town on the train that will be along pretty soon."

"But I haven't finished my business here yet."

"Yes, you have."

"That star rider of yours, you may be sure, is really guilty of theft, and on a pretty big scale at that."

"Not until she is proven so, my friend. You cannot arrest her in this town, for two reasons."

"What are they?"

"For one, she is not in this town at the present moment."

"That so? I guess——"

"No guesswork about it, Mr. Clay. She rode away from the town, now more than half an hour ago, and where she went to I'm not going to tell until some one with a better record than yours asks me. Meanwhile,

proof of her innocence of the charge against her will be speedily obtained, and then, if necessary, I will see that she is legally acquitted. With the case you have nothing more to do—not in this town, in any case.”

Clay was perspiring now more from chagrin than exercise. He could see that, being a stranger in the town, the charge of unbecoming behavior would tell heavily against him and he dared not face them. There seemed to be nothing to do except to yield.

“This is rather hard on me!” he exclaimed, more humbly than he had spoken before.

“It would be hard on me if you had taken my star rider away on a trumped-up charge. That is costly to a show like mine, I can tell you. I would have been willing to do the right thing, had you come to me in the first place. If I had reason to believe that the girl was guilty, I would have seen that she received the penalty. I would not shield a criminal. But I stand by my people, when they are in trouble, and they will do as much by me. That Melton, a clown in my employ, is responsible for some of the testimony against Isabel, unless I am mistaken, and he is no more nor less than a coward and a sneak.”

By this time the teams of the circus were arriving at the station to make ready for departure. While Rushington was speaking, a man came out of the station and approaching them, asked:

“Is this Mr. Robert Clay?”

The detective, growing pale, assented.

“A telegram for you,” said the other.

CHAPTER XXII.

CLAY'S DEFEAT.

It always seems as if surprises, like troubles, never come singly, whether we do well or ill in the world.

Mr. Robert Clay was not a reprobate, but he had been foolish and unfaithful in small things, and that kept him in a stew when there was a crisis in his affairs.

He was in a profession that did not yield a regular salary. Although he had made considerable money in his life, and did it honestly, there were times when he had little cash in his pocket.

This was one of those times. He had been in hard luck for many weeks, and he hoped by the prompt arrest of Isabel Currier to brace up his finances without more delay.

That was why he had worked so desperately. That was why he had been tempted to be a little dishonest and hasty in his methods.

So a hitch in the proceedings had been brought about. And now, while he was making a struggle so as not to lose the grip he had gained already, a telegram must come, which made his knees shake as he read it.

He read the message through three times, pretending that he could not quite make it out, although the copy was typewritten and as plain as print could make it.

"I don't understand this!" he mumbled.

"In Greek, is it?" Phil queried.

"It moight be in Kilkenny!" suggested Mamie.

"It seems to say," drawled Clay, "that somebody had been arrested for the theft of those jewels. But, of course, it is a mistake."

"May I see the telegram?"

Phil reached out for it with fingers trembling with eagerness. Nobody knew how he was troubled about the charge against Isabel. He had never realized before how he trusted her, or how painful would an unhappy discovery concerning her be to him.

Clay was more willing to hand him the message than he was to read it aloud, for the contents were too unwelcome for his lips to utter.

The message was as follows:

"TO MR. ROBERT CLAY, Private Detective:

"Esther Craig arrested in Scranton to-day for theft of Wilmuth jewels, confesses guilt. Some of jewels on person. Isabel Currier innocent. (Signed),

"T. MURNANE, Sergeant Scranton Police."

"Good—good!" cried Phil. He waved the paper in the air, and then thrust it into the hand of Mamie, who actually burst into tears as she read it.

"It's joy that Oi'm crying wid," she said, with a saucy shake of her head at the crestfallen officer.

"Must be a mistake!" persisted Clay.

"That's right, and it is you that have made it!" laughed Rushington.

"A koind of stake that's not so rare wid the loikes av him, Oi'm thinking."

Mr. Clay did not tarry to hear more comments of this kind, for he was not in a happy mood then. His pockets were empty, he had made a guy of himself, and the reward which he had thought was almost in his grasp was snatched by another.

"Great Goshen! what a mess I've made of it!" he mumbled as he shambled away, out of the sight of Phil Rushington and Mamie forever.

Phil had not been so full of joy for many a day. He had really thought that Isabel was in a dangerous situation, and the shadow troubled him more than he had cared to admit.

It had been arranged that Walt should stop at a small town eight miles distant from the one from which they had departed, and equally distant from the one to which the show was going.

Our hero was to communicate with Walt there, either by telegraph or telephone, and instruct for future movements.

Communication could not be had until morning, after their arrival in the town where they were billed to appear. But from there the good news was telephoned.

They were instructed to come on by the next train, that Isabel might be in time for the afternoon performance, and, if possible, for the street parade also.

They arrived promptly. Phil met them at the station. Isabel looked into his glad eyes as she stepped from the cars, and his delight brought her a greater one.

"Your trust was not misplaced, after all!" she said, in a low tone, as their hands met.

They were in time for the parade, but there was no time to waste. Melton came with the show, although Phil would have been glad to pay him off and be rid of his services had he been disposed to avail himself of the opportunity.

His face was swollen from the punishment that Walt had given him. His heart was sore from another cause, for he could see that Isabel knew of the treacherous part which he had played.

His motives had been to win her confidence and regard by appearing to befriend her when she had no other friend. He had represented to her, in fact, that the officer had an understanding with Rushington by which she was to be given up at the close of the evening performance.

"That was infamous, Isabel, that he should have said that to you!" Phil exclaimed, when she told him of it.

"I have thought for some time that you suspected me of some sort of crime or mischief. Yet you have been so good to me. Melton told me after the night that I went to the tramp circus tent, where you found me, that you suspected me of a crime, or a plot, at that time. That is something that I never explained to you, because to do so I must speak of this charge of theft which has been hanging over me so long."

"Walt and I agreed to wait until you saw fit to explain that matter," said Rush.

"You were so good, and I have been on the point of telling you the truth about that a score of times. But my courage has always failed at the last moment."

"You didn't trust me quite enough."

"You shall know now why I went there."

"Very well. But if it is painful, don't speak of it now. There will be another time."

"It is all over. There was a performer among those tramps, as they were called, who was formerly with the circus which I was with at that time. He knew about the stealing of the jewels, and what was being done about it, and I went to see him that night to get the latest facts. But he had few to give. He was a rough, rude fellow, but with a kind heart, and he stood stanchly by me then. That was why I paid that night visit to the tent of the tramp circus."

"Good. I am glad it is explained. Now I feel that all is clear. But this Melton must not remain in my show."

"I hate to have you turn him off on my account."

"It is on mine that he must go. My show is made up, as far as I know, of clean people. But I have at times had cause to suspect that there was some one connected with it who was a secret enemy. It is hard to locate the responsibility for certain events, but I have an idea that by getting rid of Melton some of the cause of trouble will be gotten out of the way."

Melton should have been able to act as a clown that day, but he shirked out of it, staying in the dressing-room and nursing his injuries—those to his feelings rather than the ones given him by Walt Arkwright.

Rushington sought him out after the afternoon performance.

"I expected to see you," said the fellow, as Phil came in and dropped on to a camp stool.

"On what kind of an errand?" queried Phil.

"To give me the grand bounce!"

"So you think you deserve it?"

"I didn't say that."

"Do you think it?"

"No."

"Then why should it occur to you that I came on such an errand?"

"Because I knew that I made you angry yesterday, and that you thought I hadn't done just right about Miss Currier."

"Do you think you did right about her?"

"I admit that I did not. But I was sore about some things. I am sorry for what I did. No fellow can say more than that."

"That is good, Melton. It takes some courage to confess a wrong. Now you are about it, what is the matter with you confessing some more things?"

Melton gave our hero a quick, searching glance.

Then he got up and tossed his head haughtily.

"So you are not satisfied? You want to lay some more things on to me while you are about it—you want to make a sort of scapegoat of me."

"I have had several mysterious things happen within the few weeks that you have been with me. There was the escape of a lion from the cage in the city of Columbus——"

Melton's face grew livid, and he interrupted by a

string of maledictions. He shook his fist in the face of Phil Rushington, and fairly danced in his rage. He finished by striding to the exit, saying:

"That ends it. You are bound to discharge me, I can see that. It is always the way when a man is down—everybody jumps on him then. That is you! You're a sneak!"

"All right," said Phil, rising placidly.

"Do you hear me? You are an infernal sneak!"

"All right. But you needn't take the trouble to repeat it."

"A sneaking, false, swellhead——" persisted the savage Melton. Then he felt something grasp hold of his collar, and something else in his rear, giving him a tremendous boost that sent him headlong out of the tent.

"Mr. Arkwright will pay you what is due on salary," said Phil, calmly, as the other slowly picked himself up.

"That makes a worse enemy of him, if he was one before," said Walt, half an hour later.

"How could it be helped? He was bound to have it, and I had to give it to him. I was as gentle as I could be under the circumstances."

"Probably you were. And it is likely that we are safer with him out of the show than if he were to stay in it. I really think now that he had something to do with the other mischief that you have suffered, and which has not been explained."

"So do I. But it is hard to prove, and I am at a loss to account for his motive."

"Might be jealousy, now that we know that he had taken a fancy to Isabel."

"Yes, it might be that. In that case, it is well that he is out of the show. It is well, anyway."

And there the matter was dropped.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A PROSPEROUS YOUNG SHOWMAN.

"A man is a fool to be poor. I don't wonder that the sort of people who call themselves 'unlucky' are despised in the world, even by other unsuccessful people!"

It was Phil who spoke; it was Walt who laughed in his quiet way, and answered:

"So you have struck a new philosophy, just because you have been raking in the shekels so fast you don't know what to do with them."

"It is a Phil-osophy," laughed our hero.

They were in a hotel room in a thriving city just north of Dixieland. They came in on an early express, and the circus train had already arrived, and the canvas was going up.

It was the best hotel in the city, and the best room in the hotel. Phil was the best dressed man—young or old—in the house, and the real brilliant that scintillated in his scarf, with the generally prosperous air in his walk, his tones and his gestures, made him seem older than he was by at least five years. And it may be said that it is not always a good sign when a young man of twenty carries the airs of a man of twenty-five or thirty.

Rushington had a letter in his hand which had been awaiting him in the hotel letter-box for two days. It was typewritten and signed with an undecipherable name, and sub-signed by the name of Drexel,

"These people," said the young circus owner, returning to the dignity of a prosperous man of business and tapping the open letter with his forefinger, "have been reading the papers. They know of the shows which are making money, and the shows that are losing. They are plain and matter-of-fact, and there isn't a line of flattery in the letter. I like that. I know when people are trying to enlarge the measure of my head."

"That's right, Rush. Yeast isn't the only stuff to make things fizz and swell."

"These people," Rushington continued, "have an agent at this house to make a business proposition to me. They state frankly that there will be considerable outlay connected with the scheme, and that small shows need to be cautious about going into it. But with conservative management, it provides a means of rapid advancement in the status of the circus, appealing to the interest of the best people in even the first-class cities. Do you know, Walt, that I don't like to go right by cities of a hundred thousand population and more and stop at towns of five thousand? A bigger city, a bigger show, a bigger tent, more money, without a proportionate increase of expenses, is on the line of shrewd, dignified up-building in this business."

Rushington was voicing his reflections, and Walt merely served as a phonograph to take the record of his remarks, and to give it out again when needed. And yet Walt Arkwright was not just like a phonograph, for his brain was not of wax, and consequently it did some original thinking. There were things recorded there

which had never been talked into the generous-sized receivers at the sides of his head.

"What is the particular proposition from these people that you are speaking of?" inquired Walt.

"They don't say. But they are agents who supply foreign and domestic cage stock, and through them all kinds of new wrinkles in the business can be found or supplied."

"For a money consideration?" said Walt.

"Not much worth getting can be obtained without money."

"That is good sense, Ralph," said Walt, warmly. And Walt was right.

"About this Drexel, I will have to see him and listen to his proposition, as a matter of courtesy and business tact. If he has anything to offer that is worth considering, then I will make the most of it."

"And pay the bill."

"If I contract one I will pay it, of course."

"Well, Phil, I'm not going to croak; you know it isn't my way, and, in general, it has been you who has given the good advice, and I who have needed it. But I must say that I never heard you talk in just the style that you have this morning."

"What do you mean?"

"Just a little on the spread-eagle scale!"

Rushington gave his chum a keen glance. He had never known Walt to criticise him; indeed, Phil had never been much criticised by his friends, and, of course, the criticism of enemies is usually envious or unjust.

Could it be, he asked himself, that there was any change in his own airs that provoked this new air in his friend? Or was there such a thing as envy in Walt, who had always been so faithful, always so ready to second all his efforts?

Such a query as this crossed the mind of Phil; but he did not let the matter trouble him, for it did not seem to be of sufficient consequence. Walt was not a natural man of business, anyway. He was honest and clear headed, but he would never have been capable of managing a show, big or little.

While Rushington was considering his letter, Walt was shyly fingering a missive which he, too, had received—which had been awaiting him in the hotel letter-box. Phil chanced to notice it, at last, and his interest was excited.

“I wonder if that is a business letter, old man?” Phil hinted. And he saw the cheeks of Walt flush like those of a girl who has received a letter from her sweetheart.

“Not exactly business, either,” he laughed.

“New girl?”

“Not exactly new. But we never wrote many letters back and forth. We—er—to tell the truth, it is Lena Thurber, and she has got through at the Normal School, and she is coming out this way to teach. She just sort of wondered if we mightn’t happen to strike the same town that she was coming to.”

“Ha! ha!” chuckled Phil. And he stared at Walt until the latter exclaimed:

"Miss Thurber and I were always on friendly terms, but you know there wasn't any sentiment between us."

"Oh, no. Course not!"

"It is gospel truth. You know there are some girls that you can just talk with, and be sort of confidential about your ambitions in life, and the things you like to read, and the sort of music you both like, and if you happen to be interested in the same studies, or other amusements, why, with that sort of a girl, you can talk 'em over, and nothing is thought of it."

"Ha! ha!"

"Confound you, Phil! Can't you believe a word I say?"

"Course I believe every syllable. Suppose I think you tell lies, Walt?"

"But you don't take anything I say seriously. Now, about Lena Thurber, you know she is not of the real sentimental sort. She was practical and studious. The only irregular thing she ever did while she was a student at the Normal School was to join in the rebellion against the authority of Mr. Tarberry, a teacher in the school. And your Dora Warren was chiefly to blame for that."

"'My Dora Warren'—yes."

"You know it was Dora who proposed the rebellion, and after it started it would have been ended long before it was if she hadn't had the nerve to hold out and to keep up the courage of the others."

"Nothing so very hard against her about that charge, to my mind."

"I didn't say there was. I merely was showing that Lena was the steadier one of the two."

"Lena is a fine sort of a girl, and a good girl of her sort, and it is better for you to hitch on with her than some of those that you have taken a fancy to. The right kind of a girl would be a help to you, if she did not let you keep too close to her. Girls spoil a man for business, and I'm going to have less to do with them even than I have in the past. A man can't do much business if he lets his mind be taken up with his girl friends."

"You talk like a woman hater," said Walt.

"I'm not that. But I know a lot of good, bright fellows who would make a success in the world if they didn't spend so much time dawdling about with girls. If the girls only realized that a man must hustle to make a success they might be more considerate and be a help instead of a hindrance. Some of them are. Now, Dora Warren is not like most of them. She doesn't nag me because I don't write her a fifteen-page letter every day. She knows I haven't time to do it. She knows that I have business correspondence, and men to see and to talk with. When I get where I can be independent then I can write long letters. Business—business, now!"

Walt shrugged his shoulders and was silent.

Phil was always sensible and practical, but he seemed to be in a different mood from any that Walt had ever caught him in. And it may be said Walt was not quite satisfied with his chum under the new conditions. It seemed to him that his old chum was gone, and he did not know how to talk to him.

"Miss Thurber will be in at the performance this afternoon, probably," said Walt.

"I shall be glad to see her. Wish I could spend a lot of time with her, and you must tell her so. I haven't forgotten the old days at Springvale, and the rebellion at the Norm, for it was there that I made the acquaintance of the brightest and wittiest. Wish she was coming with Lena—but I couldn't see her much, so what is the use?"

Phil yawned. Then they went down to breakfast, and an hour later Rushington was closeted in his room with Mr. Robert Drexel, the traveling representative of the New York house.

Mr. Drexel was young—he seemed to be about two years the senior of Phil. He was polite, well-dressed, and his success was due to his ability to read human nature almost by a glance into the face of one whom he had never seen before.

"To begin with," said Mr. Drexel, when both were seated in the luxurious room which had been assigned to the young owner of the circus, "let me ask you how much time you can give me this morning. I don't wish to be a hindrance to a busy man at a busy hour."

"I can give you just an hour," said Rushington, briskly, with a glance at his watch.

"Plenty of time. Allow me——" Drexel did not wait for the other to assent as he touched an electric button. Nor did he wait for his consent, either, as he gave an order to the waiter.

The order brought cigars and a bottle of light wine.

"I have been told that you take nothing stronger than

sherry," smiled Mr. Drexel, as he filled the glasses, "and in that we won't have to quarrel, for that is strong enough for the social obligation, and under no other consideration would I touch even that."

Phil made no reply to this, and he sipped a little of the wine. But he drank less than half the glass.

"That made me appear less like a crank, and did me no harm," he assured himself.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ANOTHER BREAK BY ISABEL.

Mr. Drexel was a model man of business, and he did not hazard the confidence of Phil by overstaying the hour. He was not glib nor loud nor coarse, and, withal, he was so genial and full of such subtle charm in speech and airs that Phil felt as though a new world had been opened to him by the acquaintance.

Yet the young circus owner was not reckless in ordering attractions for his show through the agency which Drexel represented. He ordered canvas for an enlargement of his tent, and two cages of wild animals. He had found that the menagerie was a drawing feature, and in that his show was deficient.

"I don't like to enlarge much faster than my cash surplus will allow, without running in debt," he declared, when gently urged to increase the size of his orders.

"A wise resolution. But debts are of many kinds, and when they are in the form of paying investment they soon put on the face of thrift. With that kind of a debt to discharge, a young man works the harder, for he feels that he has assumed a wholesome responsibility which he must look out for. It is on the same line with the taking of a good wife, and the assuming of family cares. A man alone, with no obligations of any kind, is like a boat without a rudder."

"Wife is a long way off for me," laughed Rushington.

"For me, too, I'm afraid. I have to be on the go all the time in the interest of business. But I won't urge you to dip in any deeper than you care to. Every man knows his own affairs best, to my mind. By the way, when do you leave this city?"

"Property train goes at two o'clock in the morning. I shall probably go at four, on an express. That will give me time to sleep some undisturbed."

"Yes, yes. Good plan to sleep, too—though I have got so I take mine at odd times when there is nothing more interesting going. I stay here until morning, and I find that I have an old friend living in town, and he sent an invitation to come down and see him to-night. We go to the show, of course—then I run over to his house and we have a game of cards, and his good lady will probably have a little spread served. I was thinking that he would be sure to want you to accompany me, especially if he knew you were of our sort, as you evidently are. His charmer can sing like a nightingale. She has a sister who is stopping with them who has been a member of the dramatic profession, but who has no engagement for the summer. Interesting people, with lots of experience of all kinds. Wish you could see them."

Rushington hesitated.

"I will see," he replied. When Mr. Drexel went out of the room there was a faint smile on his face which Rushington would not have liked to see.

Had Walt known the feelings which impressed his chum that morning after the interview with Mr. Drexel, he would have been yet more certain that there was a

change in his old friend. It would have been a change which Walt Arkwright would not have been able to comprehend, for it was something of which he was not himself capable.

Two hours before the time for the street parade, Rushington went to the circus grounds for the first time that day. He had intrusted much of the general management to which he was in the habit of attending to Walt, as he had some planning to do which would require solitude.

The tents were up, and everything seemed to be in as good shape as it could have been had Phil been at hand to oversee it all.

"I believe I will get rid of some of these coarser details in future," he reflected. "It will give me more time to work out plans for the improvement of the show, and attention to the financial end of it. As the show grows there is more to do, and one man can't be everywhere and do everything all at the same time. Oh, I'm learning."

As there were no ears except his own to hear this, Phil did not feel guilty of having made a boast. His hat did not set any the tighter on his head.

They were getting ready for the street parade. Grout, who was the ringmaster while the exhibition was in progress, and general utility man at other times, touched Phil on the arm.

"What is the matter with your star rider?" he asked.

"With Isabel Currier, you mean?"

"Yes. Says she isn't going to appear in the parade nor the ring to-day."

"Why not?"

"That is what I was asking you."

"I know nothing about it. If she said that to you she must have given you the excuse."

"She would give none."

"Where is she?"

"Sitting out yonder under the shade of a big oak."

"I will see her."

Rushington felt impatient—more so than he often felt toward any member of his company of performers. It seemed to him that this girl was determined to annoy him in one way or another.

As he approached the oak under which Isabel was sitting she sprang to her feet, and her cheeks flushed.

"So Grouty had to tell you, did he? I told him to keep his lips closed for once!" she exclaimed.

"What is the matter now, Isabel?"

"Nothing, except that I don't feel like showing off my accomplishments to-day."

"Aren't you feeling well?"

"Yes."

"Something has gone wrong with you, then."

"I said I did not feel like riding. Eona and Mamie can fill up the extra time. I did it for Mamie the other day when she had a grumpy spell, pretending that she was sick."

"I didn't know there was any pretense about it."

"You didn't know—that's right. Eona or Mamie, or any of the men performers, may put up some sort of a plausible sounding excuse for not doing what they ought, or for doing what they ought not, and you swallow it

right down and have more confidence than ever in human nature. But when I am out of sorts and cross at everybody and ugly at myself more than at anybody else I just tell you the truth. The reason I don't ride to-day is because I don't feel like it."

"Poor girl!" smiled Rushington.

"Now you are making fun of me. But I don't care."

"You ought to care. Do you know, Isabel, that you seem determined to disappoint me, in one way or another."

"I don't care for that, either."

"You seem to have lost your usual good sense. You are out of sorts with me about something; that is clear."

"I don't know that I am. You have treated me with your usual indifference, and I ought to be satisfied."

In this remark Phil detected a hint of the real difficulty. She was jealous—but of whom, and for what new cause, he did not then dream.

Our hero did not know then what to say or do. Ordinarily, he had displayed considerable tact in dealing with feminine moods in those connected with his shows—both the dramatic, with which his experience had begun, and the circus, into which he seemed to be getting deeper every day. But his own mood was different. He had been talking with Mr. Drexel.

"You had better shake this nonsense, Isabel, and show the people that you can ride as they never saw anybody ride before. Remember, you are on the bills, and I don't like to break promises to the public without telling the reason why."

The face of Isabel flushed. She arose and faced Phil in unmistakable anger.

"Give them the reason in the present case, if you wish!" she cried.

"Just as you have given it to me?"

"Yes."

"I shall not do that, because it would make you appear in a more ridiculous light in their eyes even than you do in mine."

"So I appear ridiculous to you, Phil Rushington?"

"Of course you do. Do you suppose there is anybody who could see you now and hear what you have said and not feel like laughing at you?"

Isabel's cheeks had been flushed with excitement up to that moment. Now the flush faded and she became pale with anger. It was the first time that she had ever been really angry with Rushington; and the very fact that she cared so much for him in her heart made her passion all the fiercer now it was aroused.

"So you are speaking the truth to me at last!" she cried. "You have felt like laughing at me, I dare say, for some time, and now you have reached a point where you had as leave tell me of it! Well, I don't have to be insulted by you like that any more. I will never ride in your ring again!"

"Isabel!"

"I will never ride in your ring again!"

She turned her back on him and walked away, going toward the street. He followed her, calling her by name.

But she would not turn her head or speak, and as he drew nearer she broke into a run.

There chanced to be no one to observe them at the moment. But that was a mere matter of good luck, and they were likely to be seen at any instant, and Phil realized that it would look queer if he were to be seen running in pursuit of his star rider in that fashion. He could not think of doing it, and yet he felt that he must not let her go like that, in anger, giving up her position with his circus and throwing away his friendship, of which she certainly stood sorely in need.

"Come back, Isabel!" he called after her once more, and she must have detected the distress in his voice. But she did not look at him, and although she stopped running, she kept on at a brisk walk.

"She will come back when she has time to think of it," he reasoned at last, and then he bent his steps toward the big tent. Here he met Mamie.

"So she has run away from ye?" exclaimed the Irish girl, laughing.

"It is no joking matter, Mamie."

"It is for everybody except Isabel and Phil Rushington! Aven the elephants and horses will laugh at ye when they come to know about it."

"Now don't try to be hateful toward me, Mamie, for we have always been the best of friends."

"It is because Oi am a frind to ye that I have the more privilege to laugh. It is a joke to iverybody but you and Isabel. It will be no joke to her when she tries to get a place loike the wan she has in your show. All the man-

agers won't be in love wid her and honest at the same toime, she'll foind that out."

"You needn't think I am in love with her, Mamie!"

"Oh, no. It is with themselves that most b'ys are in love, no matter what foine things they may spake."

"You are trying to make me angry, Mamie, but you won't succeed. I can't stop to have fun with you now. Didn't you realize that it is a serious business to have the management of a show on one's hands, with all the danger of loss, and the need of pleasing everybody, when there is nobody easy to be pleased? We are friends, Mamie, just the same as we always were, but I have no time for idle talk or fun now. Will you do some extra riding to-day to help fill the gap left by Isabel, who says she will not ride?"

"Sure, Philip. And ye better spake to Eona, the ghost. She might do the fainting act for ye. Wid all the pallor of her face, all she would have to do would be to fall off her horse, and it would catch the crowd."

Phil was in no mood to reply to the nonsense of Mamie, although he would ordinarily have appreciated the humor of it. He must see Eona, who, on account of her pallor, Mamie called the ghost.

As Phil went to seek Eona, two persons sauntered on to the circus grounds and stood partially shielded from view by a clump of small trees. One was Mr. Drexel, the other Louis Denton.

The twain were talking earnestly, and the young showman was the subject of their speech.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE PLOTTERS.

Louis Denton seemed to be in a jubilant frame of mind.

"Why, I can hardly believe the evidence of my own ears, or of your lips, Drex!" he exclaimed. "Are you not giving me a fairy story—now, honest?"

"I don't see anything so wonderful in it," said Drexel, with a puff of his cigar.

"But I was told that Phil Rushington was a regular crank on the subject of drinking things that would intoxicate. I never heard him preach about it, but there were fellows at the acad who have. And yet you say he drank a glass of wine with you this morning."

"Not more than half a glass, I said. I didn't urge him to take more, out of policy. Why, half a glass made him feel no different than he would if it had been water. It was nothing, Dent."

"It was everything. It would be nothing if he had been in the habit of taking a glass now and then, in a temperate way, like most decent fellows. But he pretended to be so stiff about it and to preach such total abstinence. That is what counts. He has broken the ice, and the next thing is to entice him to make a plunge."

"That ought to be easy. But I don't see, Dent, why you are so anxious to induce him to break a moral law. There are plenty of fellows doing that thing every day, so it is no great rarity."

"I hate Rushington, that is why!"

"I never understood yet what the trouble was between you. You remember I was away from Springvale before you entered, and I never knew anything about the rackets you used to have."

"It was this way, Drex: This Rushington didn't come into the academy in the regular way, in the first place. He was at first a student at Cushing Academy, in a little Massachusetts town sixty miles from Boston. It is a quiet, moral sort of institution, and some high-toned people have been graduated from that into the colleges—Harvard, Yale and the rest. Rushington has, or used to have, a pretty hot temper, and he happens to know how to put up a fair sort of fight with his dukes, and he got into a row with another student of that academy. They fought it out, and somehow—likely enough by a foul—he hit the other chap such a clip that they thought he would die. The professors got onto it, and for the sake of keeping up the name of the academy, Rushington was as good as expelled. He says that he left of his own will, and that even the people of the fellow he knocked out exonerated him from blame; but you know how people 'resign' when they are invited to. It was probably the same with him. In that way he entered Springvale in the sophomore class."

"Well, what of that?" puffed Drexel with the cigar smoke.

"I was telling how the row between us started."

"Were you in Cushing, or were you the one he knocked out in that academy?"

"No, to both. But I had a friend in Cushing who wrote and told me the whole business. When Rushington came into Springvale with flying colors and started in to lead in athletics and popularity, I just dropped a hint of the Cushing affair to take him down a peg. He told me I lied, straight."

Dent tried to tell the story in a dramatic and impressive manner. But Drexel only said, with another puff of smoke:

"Probably you weren't over particular about the details, Dent. But never mind. Did you hit him for it?"

"We settled it out in the old boathouse. If it had been a straight business he would have been glad to get out of Springvale, as he was to leave Cushing. But what could a man do in a fair fight with one who used brass knuckles?"

"Did he do that?"

"There's no doubt about it."

"Are you sure?"

"I don't need to be any surer."

"Why didn't you have it decided against him on the plea of a foul, then?"

"Because I was practically alone and had nothing by which to prove anything against him."

"Did the blow cut open your head?"

"It was not a cut, but it resembled a crack from a sledge-hammer. It nearly broke my skull, as a doctor said who afterward examined me."

"Why didn't you kick against the judgment in the first place?"

"I tell you I had nobody to back me up in any kind of a charge that I might make, for he had a knack of winning a certain class of the influential students over to his side. You know there are some who can do that thing."

"Yes, there are some who can do that thing," smiled Drexel. And at the same time he thought:

"I've noticed that in the end, the ones who could win over the best sort of people were the best sort themselves. But this fellow couldn't understand it if I were to say it to him. He has money, and I can afford to flatter him and to favor him—till I have pulled his leg all it will bear."

"That is why I hold a grudge against that fellow. Do you know, I had quite a reputation in the art of self-defense until I was fool enough to tackle that Rushington, with not a man to see fair play, and he of the kind to down a man in any old way that comes the easiest."

"Bad for you, that's a fact. Next time you want to be the one to use the brass knuckles. What's the odds how a man is downed, if the one who does it gets the best of him with brass or bone or brain? The fact that he gets the better of him shows him to be the better man, and that is all there is to it."

This was a fair sort of philosophy, and as nobody at that moment was getting the better of Denton, the latter was satisfied with it, since it justified him in using any means, no matter how underhand, to beat Rushington.

Louis Denton was one of those unfortunate individuals who can never forgive one who has been the cause of

their humiliation. The sight of Phil Rushington, successful and gaining in popularity, was more than he could bear. It made him intensely anxious to do something—anything—to pull his more generous rival down.

“That’s just the thing, Drex,” he exclaimed. “I had foolish ideas then about what I called honor. Now I know that the people who win simply do so by getting the best of others in the race, and everything that will fetch that result about is fair.”

“Of course it is,” smiled the other, indifferently, as though he was thinking of something else.

“Now, the thing is for me to put that Rushington in a hole in any way that I can. I tried to put up a job on him when he was in the town where I was stopping a little while ago, but the one that I relied on to put one part of the scheme through didn’t have the backbone to do his part of it when it came to the pinch. Now I want to know if you can’t help me on something that I have been thinking up.”

“Depends what sort of a scheme it is that you have been hatching.”

“Would you help in a scheme of any kind?”

“Yes, if there was anything in it for me.”

Denton stared. Then he remembered that he had the reputation of being wealthy; that, while he was at Springvale he had one or two bought friends; and it dawned upon him that Drexel was merely waiting for a bid for his services.

At first the idea did not strike Denton very happily.

But upon second thought it occurred to him that there was no better way in the world for getting what one wanted than that of using money to buy it with.

It appeared now that Drexel could be bought; and he knew that Drexel was an uncommonly shrewd young man. It followed that Mr. Drexel would be a profitable investment if he would only lay himself out to assist in getting a revenge on Phil Rushington.

"I'll see what he can hatch up for a scheme, and I would be willing to do something handsome if I could see Rushington so completely thrown down that he would never want to see the inside of a circus tent again, either his own or anybody's."

This was Denton's thought as he eyed the face of Drexel, who was still smoking unconcernedly. Yet for the moment he was not quite sure that it would be safe to make the proposition.

Denton did not have such a high sense of morality, however, that he saw reason for great scruples on the part of Drexel, provided the money considerations were large enough.

"Do you mean, Drex, that you would be willing to help me to do in that upstart if there was some money in the affair for you?"

"It would depend upon how much was offered."

"If it was a snug sum, cash down as soon as the trick was played."

"You may just about name your own price."

"All right. I won't be over-modest, Dent. A fellow

like you needs to have somebody to help spend the interest on your fortune. An idea occurs to me this minute."

Their heads went together, and they whispered back and forth. And the face of Denton lighted with malicious joy.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE INSULT TO EONA.

Isabel did not appear in the street parade. But from that she was not so much missed as she would be in the performance in the tent, for there was no more spirited and popular circus rider in the country than was the star of the Rushington show.

But Phil did not take the matter so much to heart as he would have done before, for he was in that mood in which he felt that the absence of a single feature of his show need not mar it or his prospects to a desperate extent.

"It will do her good to find that she is not absolutely necessary to this outfit," was the thought of Rushington.

At the same time he felt like giving her a lesson to pay for her fickleness and her seeming willingness to annoy him.

"What are you going to do without your star?" questioned Grout, as the tent began to fill for the afternoon performance.

"Mamie and Eona will fill the time, and the people will be quite as well entertained. Not many will think of her absence from the show, and the few who do will take it for granted that she was ill or some such cause kept her out at the last moment. There might be plenty of reasons which we could not give publicly."

"Some are always ready to talk about it, just the same. Folks are so afraid of being cheated."

"They will have to have their growl, then. I am not going to offer the girl a big bribe to appear, when that is what she is bound to do for her regular salary. It would be a bad precedent, and might make trouble in the future."

"That's so, that's so, Mr. Rushington. There seems to be no way out of it. I suppose you will discharge Isabel for this trick?"

"I have not thought about what I shall do. Haven't had time. We will give the people their money's worth and something over, and no harm will be done by the absence of one rider from the ring."

Rushington wondered not a little what had become of Isabel. He caught not so much as a glimpse of her during the street parade, but he half expected to find her in the dressing-room when they got back to the grounds. But he saw nothing of her then, and no one of whom he inquired had seen her.

After the exchange of words with Grout just quoted, Phil went outside once more, in the half hope that Isabel might return at the last moment, in regret for the rash step which she had taken.

As he passed to the rear of the tent he heard a low outcry in a voice that he recognized as that of Eona. Then he heard a masculine voice say:

"Don't get cranky at a fellow, little girl! What is the matter with our waltzing here on the green, under the

light of the sky? Such a graceful girl as you are could waltz like a top, I know!"

"Let go of me!" cried Eona, pantingly.

Phil could see that she was struggling to escape from the other who had spoken. At first Phil was not sure whether it were better to interfere at that stage or not. He did not know but the girl might be really responsible for the conduct of her assailant, and if that were the case, it would do no harm to let her get thoroughly frightened. But it soon became evident that she was striving with all her strength to release herself from his grasp, but that he was holding on like grim death.

This was enough for Phil Rushington to see and hear. He reached them at a bound, seized the man by the shoulder and whirled him about so that he obtained a full view of his face. Then a name broke from his lips:

"Louis Denton!"

Spat! sounded Denton's hand on Rushington's cheek, and the blow was so severe that the young showman staggered under it.

The blow came unexpectedly, and the pain of it sent the hot blood leaping through Phil's veins. The terrible muscles in his wonderful arms tingled, and in that moment Louis Denton was in more danger than he had ever been before in his life. The grasp of the young showman tightened on him, and he writhed in a vain attempt to get free from it.

Eona was released. She stood back, panting with excitement and her own exertions. She saw the two young men struggling and she watched them with glowing eyes.

At the same time a fourth person appeared on the scene and stood taking it in. That was Walt.

"Let go! let go!" gasped Denton.

Phil did not speak, but he loosened his grip on the other youth. Then the latter was suddenly thrown headlong, with such force that he fell at full length on the ground twelve feet away. For a moment he lay there without moving; then he arose and shambled away into the shadows of a clump of trees.

Phil stood staring after the ruffianly youth in a dazed sort of way until aroused by the voice of Eona and the touch of Eona's hand.

"He was a young brute, and he had been drinking, and you served him right!" she said.

"It was Louis Denton!" repeated Phil, as if he had not gotten over the surprise that the discovery brought to him.

"Then you know him?"

"He is an old foe of mine; but never mind. What did he want of you, Eona?"

"You must have heard what he said as you came up. He is one of the sort who think they can make as free as they like with a circus rider. I saw him while I was riding in the street parade, and he ogled me then, but I took not the slightest notice of him."

"Did you ever see him before?"

"Never to my knowledge."

Rushington was satisfied that it was not through any lack of maidenly discretion on the part of Eona that the rudeness had been committed, for he well understood that

it was sometimes through the fault of the young woman that rudeness came from a ruffian or a boor.

"Things seem to be conspiring to annoy me to-day," said Phil.

"Then this isn't the first bother that you have had? And yet it seemed to be little trouble to you to throw that fellow out of the way. I never saw a seemingly muscular young man handled so easily by another."

"My arms are rather strong," said Rushington, quietly.

"I should think so. And it seems that you have seen that young man before."

"He was the one who annoyed me in the town where I first saw you with the rival circus from which I hired you. But probably you did not notice him then."

"I do not remember ever having seen him before, unless I may have done so in a crowd. I see so many faces in that way that I get them mixed up in my memory with others whom I have met in a more intimate way. But I am sure that I never before spoke to this Mr. Denton."

"I have nothing to say about him. You have learned enough of him to-day, and I hope you will never have to speak to him again. I am glad I was at hand to throw him out of your way."

"And how easy you did it! As if he were a stick!"

"And he is a stick!" muttered Phil.

When the afternoon performance was in full blast Phil, as usual, rode into the ring. It had been his custom in the past to go in with Isabel, his star. But as she was not there, he accompanied Eona instead.

Eona knew that this was his intention, and there was at least one observer who watched her face closely as she rode into the arena. That was Walt Arkwright. For several days he had been observing this somewhat mysterious young woman, when she was with Phil Rushington, with the keenest interest.

She was usually somewhat languid in her movements, and if she felt a keen interest in anything or anybody she had the faculty of concealing the fact. Yet Walt had noticed something, and it was for that something that he was now watching so alertly.

There were two others in the audience who observed Phil Rushington with an interest which was curious rather than friendly. They were Louis Denton and Mr. Drexel.

Denton managed to get a seat where he could observe without being too much observed. Drexel acted as a shield for his companion, for the latter preferred that Rushington should not know of his presence.

Nothing had been said to Eona about the cause of the absence of Isabel from the ring. Indeed, no one could have given her anything more than a conjecture in the place of a reason.

But as she rode into the ring there was a new light in the eyes of the strange girl, and a brighter flush in her cheeks than Walt Arkwright had ever seen there before. That was not all. There was a new dash in the style of her riding, which in some degree resembled that of Isabel, although there was added to it the subtle grace and charm

which belonged to no one in the world except Eona herself.

Rushington was unconscious of this. But there was something else of which he gradually became conscious. That was the fact that Walt Arkwright was among the spectators instead of attending to certain duties which were usually intrusted to him alone. That was not all. On one side of him sat Lena Thurber, a former student of the Normal School on Lake Adineo. And beside Lena, and apparently trying to hide her bright face behind the Normal School graduate and Walt, was a third person, of whom the young circus owner obtained for some time only the slightest glimpse.

Phil was riding swiftly and in his "Buffalo Bill style," and there was a girl at his side who was eliciting rounds of applause by the daring and charm of her evolutions. They could not very well take note of all the people in the seats, and Rushington had not nearly so much interest in them as he had the first time he had appeared before the public in that way.

Faster sped the riders. Rushington was not riding the horse which he usually mounted, as that animal was suffering from a slight injury to a forefoot which rendered it imprudent to use him for a few days. The horse he was riding was less graceful and handsome than his favorite, but he was speedier, and so the ride with Eona wound up with a race around the ring which became an actual trial of speed.

While they were racing, Denton was talking in a low tone with Drexel.

"See the fellow show off, will you!" the youth exclaimed.

"He does it pretty well, anyhow, and I like a good horse race any day in the week."

"But he is no fancy rider, and what is the use of his spreading himself all over the tent just because it happens to be his show?"

"Didn't you hear those girls just in front of us asking just now if Phil Rushington, the proprietor of the show, wasn't going to ride in the ring?"

"Yes, I heard them."

"Well, I heard more than a dozen others ask the same question a little while ago. And I have heard a number speak of his riding in the parade. Didn't you?"

"Yes, the crowd seemed to be stuck on Rushington as bad as they always are on Buffalo Bill. I have been to his show twice, and each time the whole crowd yelled itself hoarse every time Bill showed himself and bowed to them, in his princely style. But then, Cody has a reputation back of it all, and what has this fellow back of him?"

"Don't know," muttered Drexel.

"Have you thought anything about the suggestion I made this morning?"

"A little."

"Got any plan?"

"Small one."

"Good! What is it?"

"Can't be told here."

"Well, if anything is to be done, it ought to be done now. There is only one more performance to-day."

"I know it."

"Weren't you going to put it through here?"

"Yes."

"Seems to me you're mighty short with your words. Why can't you say what you have been planning?"

"Denton, will you have the kindness to shut up?" drawled Drexel, turning so as to look the other fairly in the face.

"Of course, Drex. I didn't think of the possibility of being overheard here. Excuse me."

"Next time I go into a show with you, Denton, I will make sure that you have drunk nothing stronger than spring water, before I stir a yard with you. Such infernal chatter I never heard before. Now keep your mouth shut. There will be another performance to-night, and if they carry out the same programme to-night something will drop. Does that suit?"

"That suits!" said Denton. And both relapsed into silence.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A SURPRISE FOR PHIL.

As Phil Rushington and his companion raced more and more swiftly around the ring, Phil noticed that a sort of canopy had been suspended over the center of the arena, at a height barely sufficient to be cleared by the higher moving objects which would have to pass underneath it. Why it had been put there he did not know; but there were, of course, many details of the ring performance with which he had little to do directly, those matters being intrusted to Grout, the ringmaster.

The canopy was of canvas, draped with silk and spangles. Access to the top of this canopy—or, rather, to the space which was screened from the view of the people underneath or in other parts of the tent, by the canvas—was afforded by a short rope ladder, and, while the race around the ring was at its maddest and most exciting stage, two persons who had been in the reserved chairs near the exit, slipped out across that section of the arena and ascended to the space over the canopy.

Phil did not see them, and of the canopy or the probable use to which it might be put he gave little thought. The band was crashing, and underneath him a powerful horse arose and fell with an ever accelerating rhythm. Two clowns, one on a donkey, the other mounting a rackabones horse, were also racing on the inner side of the track, in grotesque mimicry of Rushington and his beautiful

rider ; and at the same time two acrobats were performing some dizzy evolutions in the ring.

It was one of those moments when, according to the young manager's directions, as many things were being done at once as could possibly be handled in the single arena. This gave an impression of there being an abundance of attractions, instead of a dearth to be strung out, one at a time, until the audience fell asleep, after the fashion of some small shows.

So the attention of everybody was absorbed, Rushington's included, and it was easy for the persons to ascend to the space above the canopy unnoticed.

Eona finished her "act" amid a burst of applause, and other "regulation acts" were gone through with, and Eona dashed from the ring. Rushington made another circuit at a leisurely pace, bowing to the people in his princely fashion. At the same time the band ceased its clamor, and for the moment it looked as if there was going to be a wait before other performers came into the arena.

But, in the silent lull, the clowns were seen to fall from their steeds, and the latter raced alone back to the horse tent. Then, as the ringmaster made a sign to command attention, the people on the seats all bent their gaze upon the canopy toward which Grout pointed in an impressive manner with his whip.

At that moment from above the canopy there issued the soft, throbbing notes of a harp, played with a skill that was perfect. And Phil Rushington was seen to wheel his horse with an appearance of surprise which was not

feigned, whatever the ordinary observers may have thought of it.

The softer music, in such striking contrast to that of the big circus band, commanded the closest attention. Besides, it was so unusual in a show of that kind that the people watched and listened with a curiosity and expectancy, for they could not even conjecture what was to follow.

The harp played a strain from a new and singular melody, of the sort that will linger in the memory of the hearer like a dream. Then from the same hidden spot came the words of a song, sung by a trio, and whose voices Phil would have recognized had he been able to credit the testimony of his own ears.

One of the voices he was sure of—it was that of Mamie. And the other two, one a tenor of marvelous sweetness and power, the other a deep contralto the like of which he had never before heard save from one person. And that one was—— But, no, it could not be Dora Warren, the poet of the Normal School on Lake Adineo!

The song was a new but popular one, and it was exquisitely done. Then followed another, of a semi-humorous kind, and then, as the crowd began to clamor for more, a new song was given—one that had never been heard by any ears that were there. The words of it, sentimental though they were, yet met with responsive sympathy in the hearts of many who would have been reluctant to confess the fact. And, as they were sung,

they are given here, omitting only the repetitions, which served as a sort of chorus :

“Often am I lost in dreaming
That two starlight eyes are beaming,
Worth and truth above all seeming,
Into mine.

“Sometimes laughter in them dancing,
Under silken lashes glancing,
Then our lips together chancing—
Touch divine!

“Trustful heart in transport beating,
Priceless moments sweetly fleeting,
Whispered pledges her entreating,
Soft and low.

“Swift two arms around me twining,
Love-lit face to me inclining,
‘Eyes of truth’ through teardrops shining—
Then I know!”

First there was a silence, broken only by the throbbing postlude of the harp; then there came a roar from the seats, from the hundreds of young people, whose quick sympathies were ready to respond to the love sentiment, whether in song or story.

There was no time then for explanations, for there were other acts to be done. Phil saw Walt and Lena Thurber talking and laughing while they looked at him. He raced into the horse tent, and all the while he kept an eye on the canopy, in the hope of obtaining a glimpse of the singers.

He had to be out of the tent for a period of but a little longer than a minute’s duration; yet that was sufficient for two of the singers to descend and hurry back among the

seats, and so out of Phil Rushington's sight. Who they were he therefore could only guess; and where they were it was not easy to discover in the crowded tent, for there was hardly an unoccupied seat.

It was in vain that he tried to get a chance to speak to Walt and Lena before the end of the performance. Then they slipped out, and when he looked for them only Walt was to be found.

"Come, old man, I want to know the meaning of this?" said our hero, when the big crowd was dwindling, and the band sent after it a parting crash of sounds.

"The meaning of what?" queried Walt, innocently.

"You know what I mean—that singing act. Is Dora Warren here with Lena Thurber?"

"Can't say," returned Walt.

"Don't you know?"

"I know a lot of things that I can't say, and I think a lot more that I haven't the language to express."

"Don't put up that sort of a bluff, Walt. If Dora is here I want to see her."

"You know what is a young lady's privilege, don't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"She isn't obliged to see even the manager of a big show if she prefers not."

"If that is her preference, of course. But you have no business to put me off in this way. That singing was a pretty thing, and it reminded me of the affair on the stage when Dora and Winnie Reynolds came out and sang that song of my composition so sweetly that I hardly

recognized it. I am sure that was Dora's voice. And Mamie was there, I am sure, also, although she wouldn't give me a glimpse of her since her last riding act. There seems to be a conspiracy in this, and I want to get at the meaning of it."

"You will find, old man, that there are some things in the world with which girls are connected that you will never fairly get the meaning of."

"You talk like a wise old patriarch, Walt. But never mind. I won't fish any more this time, but wait for the truth to come out, as it is bound to do if I am only patient. How about the tenor who sang with them? You can't sing."

"I can sing like a crow, and for the same caws," chuckled Arkwright.

"You are trying to get funny, and you don't want to do it, in business hours, for I'm not to be trifled with."

"The tenor, like the contralto, or the trioalto and the comeupto, is an unknown quality and an immense quantity, Rush, and you don't want to be trying to search the inscrutable. To change the topic—had a tent full of people to-day?"

"Yes, a big crowd. And, being right among them, you ought to know whether or not they were satisfied."

"Not a whisper of dissatisfaction was expressed, and I heard a lot of the other kind. Oh, you have got a good show, and you have found the knack of pleasing. It is queer—I can't understand it—but a kind of personal popularity seems to follow you about, so that the same

things, coming from you, please, while from others the public would be indifferent, or even inclined to criticise."

"That is gammon, Walt, no matter what your opinion may be. I am a stranger to almost every individual in the crowd which was here to-day, and a stranger doesn't get to be the pet of anybody in a moment. A fellow doesn't want to bank on those chances, either, unless he wants to get left. The thing is to deal honestly with the public, to practice not the slightest deception of any kind, and then you will gradually get friends in business of the solidest kind."

"A good maxim, old man."

Phil returned to the hotel. There he was met by Mr. Drexel, who said:

"Come, Mr. Rushington, I have ordered a dinner to be served to us privately. Just to save time, as I had something to say."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

PHIL'S TEMPTATION.

Mr. Drexel, with his silk hat on one table, sat with Phil at another table. It was in Drexel's room in the hotel, and the hour was a little past six o'clock in the afternoon.

The room was the best in the house, although that was not saying a great deal. On the table there was also the best of fare that the house could afford, and that is saying something, for the cook and the waiter knew their business, considering the size of the place.

Drexel had ordered the feast, and, as a matter of course, wine had been brought. Drexel filled the glasses while he talked—or, rather, while he told the most laughable story that Rushington had ever heard.

It was not a bad story—nothing to offend a clean-minded youth—and our hero roared over it without even a pang of self-reproach. Then Phil told one which was nearly as good, and Drexel took his turn at a laugh. So far Phil had not touched the glass at the side of his plate. He did not do so until the dessert was brought, although Drexel had emptied and refilled his.

As yet it had not become clear what the particular business was which had prompted Drexel to appoint the interview. But Phil did not wonder at it, for he was well entertained, and he was in no haste to end the meeting. Indeed, Phil told himself more than once that a fellow could learn more in ten minutes in the society of such a

man as Drexel than he could in a week with the ordinary run of men and boys.

When he first saw the wine brought in, Phil decided not to touch it. He felt as if it was a good time to show the strength of his principles. Then it occurred to him that Drexel was a gentleman, and that he would not understand a mere squeamishness in the matter of temperance.

"I won't make him think I am a crank, that thinks just a glass of light wine is a deadly poison. I wouldn't stand up at a bar and drink with the President of the United States, but this is altogether different. It is no worse than a cup of strong coffee."

This was the argument that Rushington made to himself, and he did not realize that it was the same plausible old excuse with which every young fellow—or old fellow, for that matter—surrenders a principle. Consequently, without appearing to give the matter any thought, Phil sipped the wine until the glass was nearly empty.

While the glass was still at his lips there was a light knock on the door, and then the latter was opened and a man strode into the room and paused in the middle of it, with a stare at Phil. Then, as Phil half rose to his feet, a sudden flush mantling his cheeks, a sudden quiver about his lips, this man who had entered sprang toward him, seized the glass and flung it with a crash against the wall.

The next moment he had Phil Rushington by the hand, holding on with a tightness which was friendly, and with a kind look in his kind eyes.

"John Grayson!" cried the young circus owner.

"Yes, boy. And do you mind saying what you were doing just now? Why, look at this!"

Out went Grayson's hand again, and this time it seized the bottle of wine and flung it through the open window. They heard it strike in the narrow court below.

"Any more of the stuff around?" he asked, with his rare smile, which rendered his face so singularly handsome.

Drexel sprang to his feet, and for the moment Phil was speechless.

"What is the meaning of this rudeness? I would have you understand, sir, that my money pays for those things!" cried Drexel, his voice quivering with a passion which he could not restrain, notwithstanding the gentlemanly self-control which he was trained to exercise.

"My money will pay you for them, my friend," smiled Grayson. And as the words passed his lips he put down a bank note of a value to pay for a bottle of costlier wine than the one which had been sacrificed. And that was all the notice he took of Drexel, whom he seemed to have sized up at a glance.

"If you gentlemen had private business together," Grayson went on, "I beg pardon for intruding. Otherwise I wish, Phil, that you could come out with me for a little walk. Didn't dream that I was in town, did you, old man?"

"Not a dream," Phil heard himself saying. Then he added, with a glance at Drexel:

"You said you had some business with me, but it has

not been mentioned, and as I have but little more time, perhaps you had better excuse me until after the show this evening. Then, if it is important, you will have a chance to mention it somewhere before my train goes."

"It isn't important—now!" snapped Drexel, forgetting his self-possession entirely.

"He'll excuse you, I guess," smiled Grayson. And as he and Phil went out they heard some language from the lips of the traveling man which was not polite.

John Grayson had been a former classmate of Phil Rushington's at Springvale Academy. He was now about forty-two years old, having begun an academic course at forty with the idea of taking up one of the learned professions in a most thorough manner. He had spent many years as the advertising manager in that department of a great railroad, and had received a large salary.

Unfortunately, he had acquired dissipated habits, and his business kept him under temptations of many kinds. While he had much ability, a fine mind, a nature which was even religious, and a heart which was as gentle as that of the kindest of women, yet he was thrown down by his inability to be temperate.

It is not the vicious alone who acquire habits and dissipation. Some of the most capable and liable men go out of the race from that cause—and more is the pity.

Since losing his position, he had pulled himself together, as he expressed it, and he was the hardest student in the academy. He was now ready for college, and intended to take a full course, with a professional course on the end of it. He would be well toward fifty when he

reached the beginning of life in the new profession; but there could be little doubt that a man who would have the nerve to put it through at that time would make more than an ordinary degree of success of it when he got to the work itself.

He was a brave fellow. His only habits now were those of thrift, diligence in study, and smoking a pipe. The last he would indulge; and he could give a very good argument in support of the wisdom of it—for him. He had not a friend who would have deprived him of it.

Phil Rushington loved him like a brother, and with the best of reasons.

It was no wonder, after all the talks which they had had together, that John Grayson had been shocked to see our hero with a glass of light wine to his lips.

As they went out on the street together, Phil was silent. Yet he did not expect any lecture from his friend. And in this he was not disappointed. Grayson's prompt action on entering the room and his evident feeling of contempt for Drexel told the story, and that was enough.

"And you didn't dream that I was in this town," Gray—as his friends called him—repeated, as he puffed hard at his pipe.

"No. But—look here! Yours was the tenor voice that sang with Dora Warren and Mamie on top of the canopy in my tent this afternoon?"

"I was the tenor," laughed Gray.

"I was stupid not to know it."

"You would have been brighter than I should have expected if you had recognize^d the voice under the circum-

stances. It was a high-handed trick, I will own; but Miss Warren suggested it, and I had to fall in to keep peace. It would have been pretty but for the tenor."

"It was immense, tenor and all, and you know it. It caught the crowd. Consider yourself under engagement at a liberal salary to do that thing every day between Sundays until the end of the circus season."

"Talk to Miss Warren about that, but count me out. I have other work to do, as you know. Have you seen her yet?"

"Dora, you mean?"

"Yes."

"No, for she has kept out of my way like a thief."

"She would have kept out of your way as if you were the thief if she had seen you just now, or if she knew about it."

"Don't, Gray!"

Phil's voice shook, and for a minute they walked on in silence. Then Grayson said, in his kindest tones:

"The wine was nothing, or would have been nothing to some young fellows. But it was a breach of principle with you, and that is a good deal. Even that much would throw me into the rapids. I don't ask you to let it alone; you can exercise your own judgment on that score, and I think you will be all right. But it is a tough test on a man to prosper too swiftly. Don't I know it?"

"You know it, Gray. I'll never touch it again."

"Make no pledges—I haven't, and if I did it would be like me to break them all the same day. A steady keeping along in a straight line, recognizing and steering clear of

a bad hole when you see one, is better, for me, at any rate. Some may do better under a pledge. If any find that to be the way for them, then let them take one and stick. But let's talk of something else. I have a week or so off, for I am a little out of health, and perhaps I'll tag you around and do some of your coarse work for you if you like."

"Sure, and more than that. If you'll sing as you did to-day, I'll pay you a salary."

"Talk with Miss Dora."

"How will I see her?"

"I will arrange an interview."

The young circus owner looked keenly into the eyes of his friend.

"Why don't she see me herself?"

"There are reasons. I will explain them, as she wished me to do. In the first place, how do matters stand between you and Isabel, your star rider?"

"She got angry to-day about something and wouldn't ride."

"Don't you know what was the matter?"

"No."

"She knew Dora Warren was here, and she suspected something else."

"Who told her?"

"Walt."

"That explains nothing."

"You are growing stupid, Phil, if you will pardon my saying so. Miss Isabel is jealous."

"Bah!"

"I want to know if there is anything between you—of a sentimental sort, I mean. You aren't afraid to answer such a personal question, are you?"

"We have been good friends, and that is about all there is between me and anybody else. Dora and I are a shade more than that, maybe."

"That is the truth, Rush, and the whole of it?"

"The truth and the whole of it so far as Isabel goes. I have been puzzled by her behavior more than once, and there have been times when I have distrusted her. She has a jealous disposition, yet in most ways she is a charming girl. I like her, and that is all."

"All right, Phil. Now, then, for the part of the business that Miss Warren wished me to broach to you. She has written to you, hasn't she?"

"Occasionally."

"Well, then, listen."

And John Grayson told our hero what Dora had not had the courage to tell him.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A BLACK SCHEME.

Judge Warren, the father of Dora, was out of health, and at the same time he had met with money losses which threatened to throw them out of their home.

Dora had graduated from the Normal School, and was fitted for a teacher; but she found the work trying to her and in many ways so distasteful that she wished to do something else, for a time at least.

Her success in Phil Rushington's dramatic company a short time before had put the fever into her veins for that kind of life. She had an idea that Phil might suggest something for her in that line, which she might do even in the summer season, and it had even occurred to her that she might be of some use to him in the circus. Dora, with all of her intimacy with Phil, was sensitive about telling him of her situation, and of her wishes in respect to his business. So she had a talk with Gray about it, and Gray decided to put the matter to their friend. The little surprise of their singing over the canopy was a suggestion of Dora's.

"Now," said Gray, in conclusion, "one of her reasons for not wanting to broach this subject to you was that she was afraid that you would create an opening for her, whether you need her or not. Then, too, she probably thought that you might suspect that she wanted to be with you. That part of it you may set down as so, to just

this extent: She would not join a traveling show of any sort with a stranger, and her parents would not hear of her doing so. But she would play in a settled organization of the right sort. Do you see the point?"

"I see it all. And I will act just as I know she would have me under the circumstances. I confess that I don't like the idea of having Dora Warren join a circus."

"So you think she is better than Isabel?"

"There is a difference. Isabel was almost born in it."

"Yes."

"And she comes of a different kind of a family."

"Probably."

"I shouldn't think Dora's father would listen to it, anyway."

"To tell the truth, the judge is a little unsettled in his mind."

"Ah! that is bad. And they are in a tight place, you say?"

"Yes, worse off than is generally supposed."

"Poor little Dora!"

"Don't say that in her hearing, for she won't endure to be pitied."

"That's so. Well, I will see what can be done. I meant what I said about that musical feature, as you did it this afternoon. With a good tenor to go with them, I think the feature would be a taking one, with some of the ring performance going on at the same time. It is better than to have that band roaring all the time until everybody feels like committing suicide."

"It would do for a while. And there ought to be some

work to do for you in the writing—the work of a secretary or stenographer. I suggested that to her.”

“I need help of that kind, and frequently hire some one temporarily when I am in a place where I can.”

“Well, then. She will wish to listen to your objections as to the matter of the good taste or her joining a circus troupe. You know the sort of a girl she is.”

“Pure gold!” murmured Phil, softly.

“That’s right, old man. And, say, hadn’t you better arrange this matter for her, for the time, anyway? There seemed to be no way of dissuading her from it without hurting her, and, to tell the truth, she is broken up over affairs at home. Think it over, and be the straight-out, sterling fellow that you were born to be!”

They were walking along a shady street, and the lights were far apart. Phil paused and took Gray by the hand.

“That was an awfully good thing for you to say!” he exclaimed.

“But it is true.”

“You could convince me of it if anybody could. And you are pure gold, Gray, whether you were ever told so or not. I wish I could have you with me all the time.”

“But you can’t, you know.”

“I’ll manage this for Dora, and there shall be no humiliation for her, and no talk made out of it, and everything will be all right. Now, about yourself. How are you getting on with your studies?”

“I grind hard and fast.”

“Happy?”

“Every man is, after a fashion, when he is busy.”

"That's right. But you had the blues frequently when you were at Springvale."

"I am better now, for I work yet harder."

Phil looked at his watch.

"Great Cæsar! I must make a break for the grounds. You and Dora will sing over the canopy to-night, and I will see her after the performance, if she is bound to keep so shy of me before then."

"All right."

On the grounds where the exhibition tents were pitched another scene was enacted at about the same time that the talk between Rushington and his friend was going on.

Drexel and Denton were there together, lying under a tree where the shadows of the twilight hung thickest. Earlier in the day Denton alone had been the one who was anxious to take revenge on Phil Rushington. But now Drexel was as bitter as was his companion.

"My plan, as proposed to you, would not work, because that fellow from Springvale with the Vandyke beard, who is trying to brace up in his old age, stepped in at the wrong moment and meddled. I would like to see him smashed."

"I want Rushington smashed!" said Denton, fiercely.

"I have another plan. But it will have to be worked at the right moment."

"What is it?"

"And we will have to get at the horse that Rushington will ride to-night."

"That can be done."

"How?"

"I know the fellow who has the care of the horses in the horse tent. He will have to be careful, but he has done a thing or two for me before. He let the lion out of the cage for me at one place, and that came near costing Rushington a small fortune.

"That was rough! But I don't care now. That Grayson was nasty to-day. The pair of them, with their airs, make me sick. Let me tell you of my idea. I have something with which to dose the horse that the young manager will ride, and the result will be that the animal will go in a fit, or something resembling one. He cannot be managed, and he will have to be shot, as he will race blind, and as likely as not make for the rope and get in among the spectators."

"Good! that is the thing! And it may break Rushington's neck."

"It will if he tries to hold on to him."

Just then the plotters heard a rustling sound near them, and Denton saw a feminine form start to run away from a point close to the tree under which they were reclining.

Denton sprang up, and as he did so the fugitive stumbled and fell. He caught up with her before she could rise, and a glance told him that she was Isabel.

"You were spying!" hissed Denton.

"Somebody ought to be! you villain!" she exclaimed.

"You will promise me not to give this affair away, or you will find yourself in hot water!" said Denton.

"You think I will let you carry out that scheme to kill Phil Rushington?" she demanded.

"He doesn't care a rap about you. He is stuck on that Normal School girl, and she is here to-day."

"I know that. But he has been kind to me—the truest friend I have in the world."

"You wouldn't ride for him to-day."

"I was a fool not to do so. I will ride to-night if he will let me. And I will tell him of your plot to kill him."

"You will, eh?"

"If I live!"

"You won't have the chance, then. I will see that you are kept where you can't see him until it is too late."

Isabel would have uttered a scream for help then; but the hand of Denton was clapped tightly over her mouth, and held there until she was almost strangled. She struggled frantically, and Denton had rather more than he could manage. Drexel came up.

"Lay hold of her, and get something into her mouth to stop her noise!" panted Denton.

"I don't like that business!" growled the other.

"She will give us away if you don't, whether you like it or not."

"She will do that, anyway."

"Stop her mouth, Drex, or I'll know the reason why!"

Denton was a fighter, and he was in a desperate frame of mind. Besides, Drexel wanted to carry out the scheme as much as the other did. So he took a handkerchief, and soon had Isabel effectually gagged. Then her hands were tied, and they marched her away under cover of the shadows to the edge of the woods, where they noticed

a small vacant shanty which had been used for a tool house.

Into that she was thrust, and the door fastened on her. Then they went about carrying out the rest of their plot.

The man who had charge of the performing horses was seen, and Denton's money, with a little persuading, did the rest. Still, the plotters were far from being easy in their minds, as is usually the case with plotters.

There seemed to be no doubt, however, that the man would do what was required of him. He had been with the circus for some time, and was in the same position when Phil Rushington came into possession of it.

He was a naturally vicious person. He used horses well, but he seemed to have a hatred for men. More than once he had done an act of a petty and malicious sort, the reason for which was most obscure.

He readily accepted the bribe as he had done in another case. He was not told what the effect of the drug was to be after it had been given to the horse, and he did not care to know. But he was given to understand that it would make the animal fall and so spoil Rushington's part in the performance, by giving him a humiliating tumble.

The powder was put into a pail of water of which the horse drank just half an hour before Phil came into the horse tent for his mount.

Eona was already in the ring, as were several acrobats, Barrows, the clown, and the ringmaster. And among the spectators were Lena Thurber and Dora Warren. It had been arranged that the latter would again sing with

Mamie and John Grayson as they had done in the afternoon.

"Jack seems a little nervous to-night," said the groom, innocently, as he led the animal up for Phil to mount.

"Hope he won't have stage fright," smiled Phil, as he gracefully leaped into the saddle.

The horse shot out into the ring like an arrow from the bow. And before a single circuit of the ring was made Phil knew that something was wrong.

"I'll have to ride out!" he said to Eona, as they passed each other.

Even as he spoke, the horse suddenly wheeled with a scream, as of terror and pain, and dashed straight across the arena.

Rushington tried in vain to control or to guide the steed. Grout, the ringmaster, sprang toward them, for the animal was making straight for the rope, just beyond which Dora Warren and Lena Thurber were sitting.

The next moment a chorus of cries filled the air, for Phil's horse, blind and crazed, had reached the rope.

CHAPTER XXX.

CAUGHT!

At that critical instant there were not many things that could be done. Indeed, there seemed to be only one that would be effective in season to keep the drug-crazed horse from crashing on to the seats, causing a panic, which was more to be feared than anything else, and killing and maiming spectators at the same time.

Besides, Rushington, in that wild moment, had a vision of Dora Warren bleeding under the hoofs of the animal. It seemed like quick and certain death to her and the others who were closest to the rope.

These were reserved seats, a few of which were taken on that side of the tent, and they were therefore close to the ground.

As a precaution in case of the escape of one of the wild animals from a cage, Rushington carried a revolver. And this was now drawn with lightning quickness, and the muzzle thrust into the right ear of the horse.

It was a forty-four caliber, and the loud report sounded like that of rifle in the tent, ringing out above all other sounds.

The bullet crashed through the brain of the animal. It fell in its tracks, and for a moment its hoofs beat the air as Rushington leaped to the ground, flinging himself between the horse and the girls at the point of danger.

It was a nervy thing to do, and the presence of mind displayed was comprehended by many in the crowd, and the moment they saw that the danger was over, the cries of terror were changed to cheers. The ringmaster, prompt to recognize the need of the moment, had already told the people in stentorian tones that there was no danger. "Mr. Philip Rushington, the manager of this circus and hippodrome, may always be relied upon, ladies and gentlemen, to spare no risk in behalf of the safety of his patrons."

In less time than it takes to tell it, the horse which had been shot was dragged from the tent. And in the midst of it all, Phil Rushington had two girls clinging to him, although one of them let go in the same breath. That was Dora.

But Lena got hold of his hand, and she held on to it as if she was afraid he might sink through the earth if she were to release him for a moment.

Just what was said on all sides of him Phil could hardly have told five minutes afterward. He knew that there was a great amount of cheering; that a good many strangers got hold of his hand and worked his arm up and down as if it were a pump handle; that they pulled and jostled him about, more like a fugitive criminal whom they wished to tear into pieces than like a man whom they were anxious to praise and to congratulate in every possible way.

Somehow, his friends managed to get him out of the tent; then he heard the band crashing, and he knew that

Eona and Mamie were doing some of their wildest riding in the ring to enchain the attention of the crowd. Indeed, it was a time when the ringmaster and assistant manager of the show did their best to fill every second of the time with the liveliest sorts of whirl—so much of it that the people must be fairly bewildered by it.

They succeeded. Mamie, comprehending the need of the hour, invented several new tricks of horsemanship on the spur of the moment. She seemed to have suddenly gone as wild as had the horse which had been shot, only there was a method in her madness.

She was all over her horse at the same time, springing off and on again while the animal was going at race-horse speed. The air was full of cheers, some of them still for the gallant young manager of the show, whom they clamored to see, and many for the girl riders who were doing everything in their power to divert attention.

The acrobats were turning themselves into more shapes than they had thought themselves capable of assuming, and projecting themselves through the air as if they had been suddenly given wings.

If all the performers could always have given such an exhibition as they did on the spur of the moment when Grout knew it was necessary to hold the crowd that day, the Rushington Circus and Hippodrome would have soon gained a reputation that would have led the whole country to clamor for a sight of it.

Meanwhile, in one of the dressing-rooms, Phil was the center of a knot of his closest friends. Walt was not there,

for he had to assist Grout in keeping the attractions of the arena succeeding each other.

Grayson was there, but he had only touched the hand of Phil and managed to say :

“Well done, boy !”

Dora and Lena were the closest, and the former was saying, with more agitation than she often allowed herself to show :

“This circus is bound to be the death of you, Rushy, if you stay in it, unless you have somebody right at hand to take care of you ! What in the world could have made the horse take such a freak ? Papa has always kept a number of horses, and I have been familiar with them ever since I was a child, and I never heard of such a thing.”

“It is something I don’t understand,” was all Phil could say.

“Why couldn’t you guide the horse, Phil ?”

“He seemed to have gone blind, and to have lost all sense of the feeling of the bit. Every sense seemed to have gone. He was either in a fit or——”

Phil became suddenly silent, for a startling thought came to him as if somebody had suggested it to him in a whisper.

“Why don’t you say the rest of it ?” Dora and Grayson demanded in the same breath.

“I don’t want to let out any of the wild notions that this business has set a going in my head.”

“This is a select crowd, Phil, and it is a good time to

say the worst things that you are likely to think, just to get rid of them," said Gray.

"Yes, yes, say it!" implored Lena.

Just then Walt came in, and his usually mild face looked stern.

"Barrows, the clown, told me that he studied to be a veterinary surgeon," said Walt, "and he made an examination of that horse just now. What do you suppose he says?"

"What does he say?"

The query came sternly from Phil.

"That the animal was drugged."

"How can he be sure?"

"The eyes of the horse indicate the effect of belladonna, for one thing. About that he says there can be no mistake."

"Anything else?"

"That is all he can be sure of without a more thorough examination."

"See that such an examination be made as soon as possible, and—look here, Walt."

The latter stepped closer, so that Rush could speak in a low voice.

"Have Curly, the groom, put under arrest at once. He must know what the horse ate or drank. If he intrusted any of his duties to somebody else he will be glad enough to say so."

Walt flew to execute the order. Then Phil said quietly to his companions:

"In this business nothing can be allowed to interfere with the programme. This afternoon you did a pretty thing in that song behind the canopy over the arena, and if you will put it through now it will be the most appropriate thing to quiet the excitement which is running rather high. And I will ride out on another horse and smirk and bow like an idiot, so they won't think I am dead."

"Don't strain after effect too hard, old fellow, or you may overdo it," was Grayson's suggestion.

Lena shook her little fist in his face, and Dora put her tongue out at him, all in defense of Phil, who was too much of a hero just then for them to allow his fame and name to be trifled with.

The arrest of Curly was made quietly. But he was not quiet about it. He broke down immediately, bursting into tears like a boy who has been caught in some mischief with the prospect of a whipping.

Phil was sent for and he found the fellow crouching on the ground and rocking himself to and fro in an agony of terror.

"What is the matter with you?" Phil demanded.

"I—I wasn't to blame!" groaned the man.

"Yes, you were," said Phil, so decisively that the man uncovered his face and stared at his accuser.

"You don't know! You didn't see anything," he returned, confused by the positiveness of Rushington's manner.

"Something was seen, and you will have to face it, unless you are willing to tell who put you up to it."

The man shook as with an ague.

For a moment he was silent, and Phil could see that he was debating with himself the chances of escape from consequences in case he should hazard the truth.

His whole manner so plainly indicated his guilt, and the correctness of Phil's surmise that the latter was sure that he was on the right tack. He went up to the man and looked fairly into his eyes.

"Tell me who told you to give the drug to the horse, Curly, and I will let you off. You know you did it, and you know somebody's money paid you for it."

"Yes, yes!" whined the man. He caught at the hand of Phil, and added:

"Will you let me off?"

"If you will make a clean breast of it here and now."

"I will, I will!"

"Be quick about it, then."

"That young fellow gave it to me."

"Which young fellow? The one who was hanging around the tent this afternoon, and the same who had charge of the ground in the town where we had to make a fight to get the spot to put up the tent?"

"Yes, that was the one. Denton is his name. I don't know why I did it. He paid me some money, but it seems as if I must have been out of my mind to do it. And, sure, I didn't know how it was going to work. I only thought it might make you have to give up riding the horse. That was all."

"All right. You will have to be retained as a witness against Denton, who gave you the drug."

"No, no!"

"Yes, yes. And you will lose your job. That is all will happen to you, and that is putting it mild. Don't expect anything lighter."

CHAPTER XXXI.

PHIL AND DORA.

Phil rode out again on another horse, and paid his respects to the crowd, which cheered itself hoarse. At the same time Dora, Mamie and John Grayson sang again as they had done in the afternoon, and they gave several new songs which were so "catchy" that half the people in the town were humming and whistling snatches from them the next day. The truth began to dawn upon Phil at the same time, as he knew that Dora—the Norm poet—composed the words and airs to several of those songs.

He told her of this at the close of the evening performance.

"You are a musical genius, besides being a poet! Did you know it?" he demanded.

"Oh, yes. I would be a second-rate genius if I didn't know it, Phil Rushington."

"You are a first-rate one, and you may consider yourself—well, call it engaged!"

Phil's voice dropped a little as he said that, and it was light enough where they were standing for each to see the bright color in the face of the other.

"At a salary, as Grayson just told me," she managed to say, while her voice trembled a little.

"Yes, and in any other way that you will think favorably of!" whispered Rushington.

Their faces were close together, and both were in a

mood to say such things, and their hands met, and so did their lips. It was not the first time. But they were young, and two minutes later Dora said, with her merriest laugh:

"What an act that would be on the stage, Phil Rushington! Only, if you had your dramatic star, Miss Reynolds, she could do it with more effect. With her it would be sort of real, you know."

"And wasn't it real with you, Dora?" exclaimed Phil, disappointedly.

"Oh! I was just practicing, so I could go through with it on the stage. I expect you will go into the dramatic line again some time—don't you?"

"Possibly. But, truly, Dora, I mean everything I say——"

"Impossible, Rushy, dear. You often contradict yourself. I have heard you."

"Can't you be earnest, Dora? Come, I have wanted a serious talk with you for a long while."

"You ought to know better than to expect it."

"Why?"

"Did you ever know me to be serious?"

"Yes."

"You were mistaken. I never was, at least when I was talking in the way I did just now—rather, acting in that way. I was just practicing for the stage."

"Truly, Dora, you are a dear girl, and it is brave of you to come away from home to earn money to help, now that your father is ill and in trouble."

"Then Grayson told you all about it?" Dora's voice

fell, and so did her eyes, and Phil knew that there were tears which he must pretend he did not observe.

"Gray told me all."

"Gray is awfully good, don't you think?"

"The best man living."

"Yes, the best man living, Phil, dear; but I didn't say——"

"You didn't say what, Dora?"

"That he was the best boy living. Too old to be called a boy, you know!"

"You do a deal of dodging in your talk to-night."

"An artful dodger, that I am."

Phil tried again to be a little loving, but Dora would not permit it. She was in a mood to talk business, and it was settled then and there that she should enter his employ for a while at least, and the amount of the salary was agreed upon, and, as far as possible, the nature of the duties. The engagement was made for a month only, for it was by no means certain that Dora would wish to continue longer than that.

"The trouble has come to us so suddenly that I have not had time to think yet," Dora said, a sadness in her voice and face such as he had never seen there before.

"How did it come about?"

"I don't know. Papa has been failing mentally longer than we knew. I think he made some transactions when he was not capable of knowing the nature of them. Somehow, everything we had, or that we thought we had, went in a moment, as it were."

"How does your mother take it?"

"She seems to scarcely realize it yet."

"And your father?"

"He realizes no more than a child."

"Then, you, my poor girl, are as if alone!"

"In that respect. It is that which sends me out to earn my living. To teach I must leave home the same; and, somehow, I had no heart for the work. I wanted to be somewhere where I could sing, and compose stuff, and do such queer things, just to occupy my mind, and get a living out of it. At the same time, Rush, I wanted to see somebody awfully."

"Whom did you wish to see?"

"It may have been Walt. Anyway, he was the first one I saw after I got to where your show stopped. And I had a glimpse of you, and somehow you didn't appear natural. You seemed to have grown older all of a sudden, and to have an air of being the manager of a big show, and to have forgotten that you were not so old, not yet out of school—that is, if you were doing your duty by yourself."

Phil's face fell. He thought of Drexel, of the glass of wine he had taken that morning, and of the other which John Grayson had snatched from him before the last performance.

He knew then that he had been tempted further than he had realized at the time, and his cheeks burned. An hour before he would have given any money rather than have had Dora Warren know of his temptation and brief weakness. Now he found himself telling her of it, keeping not a word of it back.

"I was getting what the boys call a 'swelled head,' and now I know it! And you will never think so well of me again, I am sure. But I couldn't go on and have you believe me so much better and stronger willed than I knew myself to be."

Dora took Phil Rushington's hand and raised it to her lips.

"Now, I know that you are human, and not a demi-god, as so many have thought. I believe we can be pretty good friends. What do you say, Rushy?" she exclaimed.

"Don't say that, Dora?"

"Won't be friends with me, then!"

"Yes, yes. But I was no demi-god, and nobody thought so."

"I did. So did Lena, and a lot of others. I'm glad you have been found out. I'm glad you did wrong."

"That is nonsense, Dora. You have forgotten the fearful temper I have."

"You have overcome that."

"No, I have not. It is the same now, and I have to fight hard to keep it down. Why, if Louis Denton were here this minute I could thrash him within an inch of his life!"

"Wish he was here. I would like to see you do it, and, but for you, I wouldn't care so much if you passed over the inch! He will have to be hanged some day, in any case, for his heart is full of murder. Have you forgotten Springvale and the big lake?"

"I will never forget where and when I first saw you, dear."

The evening was warm and pleasant, and while the

tents were being removed and the other property of the circus loaded on to the teams, and the wagons rumbled and the voices of the workmen sounded in subdued tones, Phil and Dora paced to and fro, continuing their mutual confidences. Suddenly a slender form came running toward them out of the darkness, and they were confronted by Isabel. She looked almost wild, and she trembled as if she had a chill.

"The horse—the drug—those terrible men—oh, Phil Rushington! Is it time for the performance yet? Am I too late?" she cried.

Our hero caught her hands. They were cold as ice.

"What is it, Isabel? The performance is over, and I am all right. But what do you know about the horse and the drug?"

A strange, unnatural suspicion flashed through the brain of Phil.

Did Isabel have anything to do with the drugging of the horse?

CHAPTER XXXII.

ISABEL'S STORY.

Dora Warren took the nervous girl in hand, and it was she who succeeded in calming the star rider of Rushington's circus so that she could tell a straight story of her terrible experience of the evening.

Phil could hardly believe the evidence of his ears.

"Do you say that Mr. Drexel was with Louis Denton, and that he helped to make a prisoner of you so that you would not betray them?" he cried.

"Yes, he had a hand in it. And it was his wit that supplied the idea of drugging the horse. He is as bad as the other."

"And you would have warned me, Isabel?"

"Yes. See how I fought! If they catch Denton, see the marks of my fingers on his face! If I could only have gotten at my revolver I would have made an end of the villain!"

"It was a brave thing that you did!"

"It was not brave in me to desert you yesterday. I was ungrateful, and a coward in that. I wish, almost, that I had been the one to ride the horse that they drugged."

"Don't say that, Isabel. But how did it happen that you were so near the tent to-night just before the beginning of the performance?"

"I was coming back."

"To see me?"

"To ride when my call came. And Philip, will you forgive me—ever?"

"Yes, that was done long ago, for you would not have done what you did to-night if you had not been a true friend to me. Why, they might have killed you, as a dangerous witness to their guilt."

"Denton said he would do it. I believe he would if I had not managed to get out of the hut where he put me, and hidden in the woods until they got out of the way. They tied me up so hurriedly that it did not take long for me to release myself."

"That Drexel must be caught, as well as Denton, if possible," said Phil.

He saw that Dora secured a conveyance to the hotel, and then went in search of an officer.

Dora was very tender of Isabel, and the latter was strangely willing to accept the kind offices of the one of whom she was jealous.

When Isabel had a change of clothing, and had taken a cup of tea in Dora's room at the hotel, she told Dora of all that had happened.

"Do you know why I would not ride to-day?" she asked.

They sat side by side, and Dora was holding the hands of the beautiful circus rider in her own.

"How should I know?"

"You might suspect if you were as sharp as Phil Rushington thinks you are."

"You see I am not. And perhaps, Isabel, you are not

so clever as a rider as he believes you. He always thinks better of people than they deserve."

"Does he think I am clever?"

"He wrote to me, and said that you were the most attractive rider in the world."

"I would rather be the one written to than the one written about," said Isabel, smiling.

"I am not sure about it."

"I am. But I don't wonder that he likes you. And it was horrid in me to be jealous. That was why I would not ride. Walt Arkwright told me that you were here, and that he thought you wished to join the circus. And I was almost wild when I heard it. He had me for his star; then he got Mamie, and praised her, and then he hired Eona, and she won some of the admiration that belonged to me. Now he will hire you, and you will stand first with him always. That is what I thought, and it made me wild. It was foolish and wicked in me. I am sorry, sorry, for I know that you are the loveliest girl in the whole world, and I don't blame him for caring for you."

"He doesn't care so very much, perhaps."

"Oh, he does. Of course he does. He can't help it. And you care for him."

"Hush, hush!"

"It is so. I am not sorry. You are better for him, for you are a lady, and I am only a circus rider."

"You are the dearest girl in the world, Isabel!"

"I am only a circus rider—though a star rider still!"

"You are a dear, Isabel, and I love you! You darling

girl! If Phil Rushington, or anybody else in the world, were to be unkind to you, they would now have to answer to me for it!"

Isabel bent her fair head to her new friend, and the two girls sat silent for a long while, their hearts beating in unison, both thinking of Phil Rushington, of each other, of the moments of happiness and of pain which had come to them in their brief past, of that which might come to them in the near future.

Isabel's past had little of brightness in it; Dora's had always been bright until recently. What did the future hold for her? She was thoughtful enough to realize that she might be on the threshold of trouble and care and misfortune. She had sung and laughed so much; now the tears might come sometimes even to her bright eyes.

"But I will be near to Rushy, dear, for a while at least, and that will help," she thought.

Down in the hotel parlor at that moment Walt Arkwright and Lena Thurber were soberly talking about the science of teaching—"pedagogy," as it was called in the Normal School. And Walt seemed to know as much about it as if he had made it the study of his lifetime.

The young circus owner came in an hour later, with the report that Drexel had taken a train out of the town just before the close of the evening performance.

Denton had been caught and was in the jail.

A council was called in the hotel, and it was decided that Phil and Isabel should remain to appear against Denton in the local court the next morning. He would surely be held for trial before a higher court, and they would

have to be on hand to see him convicted when the time should arrive. But that might not be for several months—weeks, at least.

Isabel was nearly prostrated by the struggle and excitement to which she had been subjected the night before. Yet there was a new dignity in her manner, and it seemed to Phil Rushington that she had never looked so well.

“I’ll never run away and serve you such a trick again,” she told him.

“Didn’t you say that before?”

“Perhaps. But this time I will keep the promise.”

“I will never blame you very hard for anything after this, Isabel, for you risked your life to save mine. You are a heroine!”

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AT A WAY STATION.

Phil sat on the back of his favorite saddle horse, with both his legs dangling on the same side of the saddle, and re-read a letter which had just been handed to him by the man who acted as railway ticket-seller and postmaster combined at the small station where the circus train was obliged to stop.

The circus was not to exhibit in that place—not a bit of it. The Mossman & Rushington Circus and Hippodrome now sought bigger fry in the way of towns than that. But it had to pass through, and as it was on a single track road the train had orders to wait on a siding for another train to pass.

The letter was from Norman Carpenter, the advance agent. The passage which held the attention of Phil with such vital interest was as follows :

“From Rawley to Charlotte by rail you have to take a roundabout course, and there is scant time to get you here before noon, and there will not be time for you to give a street parade before twelve o’clock, unless they make a quicker run than usual. You can’t depend on it. I have looked the ground over in every possible way, for I want to get you into this region, which is little worked by the circuses on account of the bother of getting here. But once across the blank strip of territory and you will strike a collection of good towns that will give you a wel-

come. To add to the trouble, there have been heavy rains and one or two washouts, and there is a good chance of your being stalled on the road if you depend on the trains. You see, the rail route takes you on a course which really covers two sides of a square, or about double the distance which you would have to traverse in the one other way which I will here suggest. If you don't like the suggestion, and are willing to risk the getting here late, stick to the train; otherwise, unload at Rawley, where your train will have to wait an hour or more, anyway, and come across the country as per the road map sent herewith, with the teams. The road is bad, it is true, and you have to cross the river by steamer and land four miles below on the other side. You will notice on the map that there are two roads; I marked the one which covers the longer course as safer on account of a boggy strip when the water is high, as at present. The other is three miles shorter and might do on horseback, but the 'bulls' and teams will have to go the longer way, and I am told that it would be safer to stick to it with the whole outfit.

"Such, Rushington, is my judgment; and may the mud and water have mercy on your soul! I have told you the plain facts, and now you must choose. Best of luck and a serene old age to you.

"Cordially yours,

"NORMAN CARPENTER.

"P. S.—There is another circus making this way, but I couldn't ascertain whose, nor the route. So, for Heaven's sake get here ahead of it and in good order. C."

The last clause—the postscript—was what gave Rushington pause.

"What show can it be that has struck across my path at this time, and in a region where I thought I had the

field to myself?" the young circus owner exclaimed, half aloud.

The hour was two o'clock A. M., and Phil read the letter by the light of the lamp that hung on the front of the station.

The station master was inside, half asleep, for it would be some time before the other train would be there. The circus train was on a side track, and Phil had not disturbed a soul of the members of his troupe, not even a canvas man or other laborer. Rushington had a name of being most merciful to his people, although discipline reigned supreme throughout the organization.

Upon receiving the letter—he had expected one from his advance agent at that station—Phil had unloaded his own saddle horse, with the notion of riding out on the road which had been marked as the shorter, and possibly dangerous from high water. He had an hour, and could explore a good bit of the way before his train would have to start in case he should decide to keep on by rail and risk being late.

But having mounted, he stopped to re-read the note, as stated. And that reading caused him to decide what to do.

"One thing or the other at once will get me there, but an hour of dawdling may lose me the race," was his thought.

He flew about like wildfire. First, an order was given to the station master that his train would be unloaded there and go on empty, ready to transport them the next night from Charlotte. Then he went to rouse Walt and

the other foremen. He left the performers undisturbed until the last moment, for they would mostly ride on horseback, and so would be able to traverse the distance to the river landing much quicker than could the laden teams and the animals which would have to go on foot.

"This is what I call rather sudden," said Walt, rubbing the "sand" out of his eyes.

Phil hurriedly explained the situation, and Walt said:

"Well, it looks as if it ought to be sudden, if we are to race for a first chance to exhibit in the towns across the river. But our people will growl some at being turned out on to the road on a dismal night when they have just begun to put in their time in sleep. Not many of us are used to the old-fashioned way of circus transportation."

"That is so. And our teams are not fitted for it, either. But there is no help for it. Here we go."

It was swift work. The movements of a circus, when it comes to the mechanical part of it, always are swift. Phil had the cleanest set of men that could be hired for the business, as he was forever weeding out those who were uncivil or disagreeable. Yet he could not complain when one or two used strong language when they found what was to be done. Grout, the ringmaster, and the Irishman who bossed the canvasmen, had the most to say.

"And would ye have us hoomp it loike a caravan on the desert?" demanded the latter.

"Just the same if it came to that, Mike. But it is a matter of pride with every man connected with the Mossman & Rushington Circus and Hippodrome not to let any

other show get ahead of us. You are a part of the organization, and if we get left, you will be with us," said Phil, quietly.

"Left, is it? Oi will not. If we get left it is meself thot will thry for a chance wid the show that bates us in the race."

"Do you mean it, Mike?"

"Thot Oi do!"

"And how is it with you, Mr. Grout?" Phil asked of the ringmaster.

"I am with Mike in that verdict," was the reply.

"Go to the other men and tell them what you have said to me, and we won't be the ones to get on to the ground at Charlotte second in the race. If every man will do his best we will be all right."

When Phil put the matter in this light it set the men into a different mood. They became fired with the ambition to fetch the Mossman & Rushington in ahead in the race. They fell to with almost furious eagerness.

Never was so much circus property unloaded from a train in a briefer space of time.

Of the performers to be awakened, the female members were the last. Eona was the first to appear, and Mamie was a close second.

Rushington knew that the steamboat would make an early start, and he was anxious to get the heavier part of his property and the animals to the landing in ample season. It was not probable that the boat would be able to carry the whole at a single trip, and this made the need of an early start all the more imperative.

There was the possibility, too, that the boat might leave the landing earlier than expected, and as it would not be known that they would have a circus to transport across and down the river until Phil or some one connected with the show reached the landing, it seemed to be necessary as a matter of prudence that some member of the company be sent on in advance of the heavy teams.

This matter was broached to Phil in a momentary talk with Walt. The latter instantly replied:

"Take the lead yourself, and make sure of chartering the steamer, on the best terms that you can command. You could beat a commissary general when it came to chartering transports and making things hustle generally."

"That is all right; but things have got to keep moving at this end of the route at the same time, and who is going to attend to that?"

"I am going to attend to that, old man—see?"

"All right, only I didn't know whether you wanted to handle it alone or not."

"I'm feeling just like it, Rush."

"Well, I shall take the shorter road, for I am going horseback, and there is not much danger of getting stuck on account of the water if I travel light. I wish two or three of you would go along with me; then I would be sure of so much."

"Let the girls ride with you. They would feel happier plodding through the darkness with Phil than they would in ever so comfortable quarters with that same Rushington away from them," growled Walt.

"Perhaps you are right. But I will have to find out

first or it would be like them to say that I have no need to flatter myself. Here is Mamie. See what she says."

"And is it here that ye are going to pitch your tint, may Oi be axing?" she exclaimed, as she came up, rubbing her dimpled fists in her sleepy eyes. Yet the latter were bright as stars, and there was a world of mischief dancing in them at the moment.

"Nary a tint here, colleen!" mimicked Rush.

"Then what is the matter that ye be turning us out of our bunks at this toime of the night?"

"Just for a little practice in riding, Mamie. Time is getting more valuable as I grow older, and I have begun to realize it all in a bunch, so to speak. But I will tell you the honest truth, and that is we have got to take a short cross-country ride to a steamboat landing on the river. I go ahead of the loaded teams, and by the shorter of two ways. Where are Dora and her brother Elmer? And Isabel, also. She was always awake when she need to to be asleep; have the tables turned so that she is ready to sleep when the rest of our people are taking their longest doze? She will come to it one of these days, and wish she had been easier with herself."

Even as Rush spoke a slender, willowy-formed girl stepped from the sleeping car and in a moment was on the back of her own horse, which had just been unloaded.

This was Isabel, the star of the circus.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WHAT MAMIE SAW.

The Mossman & Rushington Circus and Hippodrome was not yet a large affair, simply for the reason that Phil Rushington, who was the sole proprietor, had not the capital to handle a big show. But it was clean, it was bright, its people were of the most select character, and it presented several novelties. That was not all. Phil was ambitious, and almost every member of his company of performers was a personal friend to him and consequently interested in the success of the whole organization.

His success had been phenomenal from the start. This was not because of a "great aggregation of wonders," but because of the personal popularity of its proprietor and the winning qualities of several of his performers, besides the novelty of some of the surprises introduced.

His clowns were not many, but they were clowns. His menagerie was small, but the animals were large of their kind, and many of them were trained to do tricks. Several new cages had been received at the last large town visited, and some special "business" for the ring was being devised.

Rush went to give a few final orders to Grout and Michael Ryan, and then instructed Walt further. Meanwhile, Isabel, Mamie, Dora Warren and Eona pranced up on their horses, ready to follow wherever Phil Rushington might lead.

Elmer Warren, the brother of Dora, was a young man who had just joined the show. He was instructed to stay behind and help about the work, as in that way he would obtain a more intimate knowledge of the business, which would be essential in the work which he was to do in the interest of the circus in the immediate future.

"Are you quite sure to reach the river landing by the route you have chosen?" Walt suggested, when they were about ready to start.

"I'm going to consult the station agent here about the roads. He may be able to cast a little light on the matter and avert disaster," said our hero.

The man in charge of the station was slow and stupid, in every imaginable way. He "hemmed and hawed" for five full minutes without helping matters.

"Shorter road's nearer," he sagely declared. "Maybe it's flowed over 'long the flat, and then ag'in maybe it ain't. T'other road's longer, and ye got to cross the crick. Can't go around the crick. Toler'ble sort of bridge, if 'tain't washed away. Can ford the crick, if 'tain't too deep. Or, ye can foller crick down to where it j'ines the river—that is, ye could do that if 'twasn't for the low spot that's mostly flowed over."

Such was the sum and substance of the information obtained from the man in charge of the station. Then Phil asked about the shorter road, in the hope that there might be just a glimmer of more definite information concerning that in case he prompted a bit just to hold the man to the point.

"What I want to know," said Phil, "is whether or not

the shorter road to the river landing is likely to be overflowed, or so boggy that I can't get across on horseback, with the water as high as it is now?"

The man scratched his head.

"How many on ye going?" he asked.

"Five, to start with."

"All hossback?"

"Yes."

"Ever over the road before?"

"Never."

"Hosses afeard of water?"

"Not very."

"Them gells going with ye?"

"Yes."

"Them the bareback riders in yer circus?"

"Yes," laughed Phil, with a glance at Dora.

Isabel was the only one of them all who was not smiling by this time. She was watching Dora, and she saw what she imagined to be a contemptuous curl of the lips.

"She doesn't fancy being classed with the circus riders," was the bitter thought of the jealous star of the circus.

"Wish ye was going to show right here," said the man, with a glimmer of animation.

"I think we will have to if we wait for you to give us any pointers about the roads," said Phil.

"In a hurry, maybe. Wal, if I was you, I'd use my own judgment about taking ary one of them roads. Say, which one of them gells can ride standing on t'other foot with her han's clasped over her head, same as I've seen 'em in the picters on the bills?"

"This one," said Phil, riding alongside of Dora.

"Hope I shan't fall out of the saddle now while he is looking," laughed Dora.

"I should think you would rather," said Isabel, in a low voice.

"Why, Isabel?"

"Because I suppose you feel nothing but contempt for a mere trick rider. I do not blame you. I would rather be a lady, than to be the best rider in the world, with the newspapers full of talk about me."

"I would rather be the best rider in the world, if I could only draw the salary of one," Dora replied, with a look straight into Isabel's eyes.

"Why would you?"

"Because my father needs the money. He was well-to-do for many years; now he is poor and in debt."

"I supposed your people were rich and that you never knew what it was to do work of any kind."

"I never did, except to help at home, and to study. My mother taught me to do much of the work about the house, for she said that in no other way could I know how to direct the work in a house of my own if I ever had one."

"And that is all you ever did?"

"Yes, except to teach one term in a country school. That was enough for me. I hate teaching."

"That is easy work."

"What, in a country school? Did you ever try?"

"No, for I have not an education for that."

"You wouldn't call it easy work if you had. Where I taught I had to sweep out the schoolhouse, 'tend the fire,

scrub the windows, so as to let in the sunlight, thrash the boys, shake the girls, and a lot of other things that weren't real easy. If I could have gotten a city school to start with, it would have been all right; but they wouldn't give me that. Would you prefer that to riding a handsome horse and kissing your fingers to the people, and hear them applaud?"

"Perhaps not. But a teacher is a lady."

"I have seen some who were not. And aren't you a lady? I think you are one, and I know somebody else who thinks so."

"Who else?" Isabel eagerly asked, lowering her voice. At the same time she glanced toward Phil Rushington.

"Yes, he thinks so," nodded Dora.

"How do you know?"

"He has said so."

"I don't believe it!"

But Isabel's face was beautiful with bright color, and her eyes shone brilliantly, as Dora could see by the light from the lamp on the front of the station building.

"We will try the shorter road," said Phil, riding up to them. "So far as I can gather from this man, the chance of getting through by one route is as good as that by the other, and I suspect that he knows very little about either, for he stays right here at the station all the time. Come. We'll make the best time we can, and I guess we'll pull through somehow. We had better keep as close together as we can, for it is dark, and there is a chance of our horses striking into a bog."

They started, the young circus owner a little ahead. But Mamie soon rode up alongside of him.

"Did ye see the other chap, Rushy?" she asked, in a low tone.

"What other chap?"

"The one in the office."

"Was there anybody besides the man I was talking with?"

"Sure, me b'y."

"Then I didn't see him."

"He was fresh, and made oies at me from the rear platform of the building, jist as I mounted me horse."

"Young or old, Mamie?"

"Both. His behavior was grane, like that of a b'y, but he had the face on him of a man of fifty. Split the difference and ye moight get at his true age."

"I don't see as there is anything important in the circumstance, Mamie. Why did you mention it?"

"Because I noticed that he seemed to be trying to kape out of your sight."

"Do you think he really tried to avoid me?"

"Whin ye came around the other side of the building he dodged inside of it, and rubbered at ye through the window. Thin whin yet got back to this side he skipped to the other platform again and tried to twist his neck and oies so as to look at ye around the corner of the building. That was not all, ayther."

"Give me the rest of it, then."

"Oi saw him say something to the older man in a sly

sort of way, and thin, unless me oies desave me, he paid the other man some money."

"Your eyes deceived you, Mamie, for a man doesn't pay money unless he is asked to do it. Some never pay money even when they are asked."

"Belave me or not. Ax Isabel. She niver loies! She is a p'ach, with the bloom still on!"

But Phil put more faith in the warning of Mamie than he pretended.

CHAPTER XXXV.

DORA'S DANGER.

The highway along which the little party rode at an easy but fairly rapid pace was better than the average in that region for the first three or four miles. Then they began to find some mud, and the pace had to be slackened.

Phil rode ahead of the girls alone for quite a distance. He found it dull business, and he wished that one of them, at least, would ride up with him and keep along at his side. As to which one of the four he would have preferred at that moment perhaps it would have been hard for him to decide, had he been asked.

It was Isabel, however, who did overtake him. Then he was a little disappointed because it was not Dora.

"She hasn't seen much of me lately, and I should have thought that she would have a lot of things she would wish to tell me about her school life," was his thought.

But he would not allow Isabel to suspect that he would have preferred then to have talked with Dora.

"It is so dark, and the wind makes such a dismal noise, that I wanted to get closer to you," said Isabel.

"It is a dismal region at best," said Phil, "and I am glad I don't have to make the trip entirely alone. This isn't like the populous parts of New England, where you can hardly get out of sight of a dwelling in whatever direction you may travel. The other girls are falling pretty well to the rear, aren't they?"

"Eona and Mamie are together, and the—the other is behind them. She does not seem to be in any hurry. I thought she would wish to ride with you, and I kept back so as not to intrude."

"You mean Dora?"

"Yes."

"You were considerate of her. You see, she would rather ride alone."

"I don't believe it, just the same."

"You don't seem to have much faith in Miss Warren."

"She is a lovely girl, and we have promised to be the best of friends."

"Do you live up to the pledge?"

"I do my part. But she has a way of freezing one out at times."

"I learned that a good while ago. Lots of girls have that trick, and I guess it is a good thing, on the whole. You can do the same trick pretty well if you try."

"I wonder if anybody cares?"

"I know one who does."

"Who is that?"

"Walt."

"Pshaw!"

Isabel whipped up her pony and Phil had to strike a lively pace to keep up with her. They heard the sound of pursuing hoofs, and supposed that the other three girls were following close behind.

It was somewhat muddy there, and there was a downward slope to the road which Phil did not like. Presently they came to a point where the road seemed to fork, and

here he paused to make sure which of the two tracks was the most likely one to follow.

There were a few scrubby trees scattered about; and there were places where there seemed to be dark, narrow strips, which Rush knew was water. There were fleeting clouds overhead, but there was a moon behind them, and it was not very dark.

Eona and Mamie rode up close to their leader, but, for some reason, Dora had fallen well to the rear. When she reached the spot where the road forked she could see no sign of her companions.

For the first time she felt uneasy. She looked in every direction, and then dismounted to see if she could find their tracks, so as to know which of the two roads they had taken. She dared not choose until she had some sign to go by.

It was too dark for her to see very distinctly, but she thought she detected tracks which had been recently made, and remounting her horse, she followed the road out upon which those tracks invited her.

She had, in truth, found tracks, and they were those of Phil's horse. But, had she examined the way again a little further on she would have discovered that the tracks did not go far. He had gone a little way out on that road, and then turned back, convinced that it was not the one which led to the river landing.

Dora urged her horse to a swifter pace, and wondered that she did not come up with the others. Soon the horse became reluctant to advance, and she noticed that he seemed to travel with difficulty. At the same time she

observed that a sloping plain extended in front of her, and on both sides of the narrow, muddy road, and that the plain was irregularly crossed in all directions by black lines which Dora knew to be water.

She suddenly pulled up on her horse, oppressed by a sense of horror.

"I chose the wrong one of the two roads! I am lost!" she cried.

The horse was moving at a walk. Now he plunged, nearly throwing her over his head. Then he stopped, with head down and breathing hard. Then he made a forward leap, cleared one of the black channels, and suddenly sank to his knees in mud and water. That was not all; the more he tried to clear himself, the deeper he sank!

"Help!" screamed Dora.

She sprang from the saddle, alighting on a hummock which shook under her feet. She leaped from that to another, which gave until she nearly slid off into the black ooze. It seemed to her that all the earth around her was trembling with her every movement.

"Oh, I shall sink! I shall sink! God help me!" burst from her lips, for she had never before known such terror. A lake or an ocean would have seemed less horrible to her than those black lines of water, so still and snaky, with the tremulous clumps of earth on every side, and nothing that would not quiver and gurgle if she placed the weight of a foot upon it.

The strange motion to the earth, whenever she attempted to move, gave her a sense of nausea; her head swam, and she did not know which way to turn to re-

trace her steps. She caught a glimpse of the horse, which had ceased to struggle, and which seemed to be sinking deeper in the morass each instant.

The clouds over the moon thickened, to add to the dismalness of the scene. The wind blew harder, and a few big drops of rain pattered around her, sounding like stealthy footfalls in the darkness.

Dora hardly dared to stir. Yet the thought of remaining there to await the coming of Rush to her rescue was intolerable. Would he come at all? They might not miss her until they reached the landing. Then he would have to ride back, and he might not explore this strip of crossroads for hours. Meanwhile, a single misstep might sink her in the quagmire—the most horrible of all fates to her imaginable.

Dora Warren had a strong will; but there was something about her present danger that paralyzed her power to stir. She managed to face about, and at last ventured to try another hummock. But it contracted like a wet sponge under half her weight, and she sprang back to the one which at least sustained her. It seemed to her then that the black channel in her rear had grown broader, and she imagined that the bit of earth upon which she stood was afloat like a raft, and that she was drifting farther and farther away.

She shouted for help again and again. The sound of her voice in that lonely place terrified her, and she could scarcely summon resolution to continue the cries. Yet by a strong effort of her will she did so.

It seemed at last as if there was an answer. Was it

but an echo mocking her? She shouted again—and yet again.

“Here! All right, but stay where you are. Don’t try to stir!”

“Thank God!”

A passionate gust of wind swept across the morass, and a dash of rain spattered in Dora’s face, and made the little curls that crinkled about her temples twist up the tighter, for they were not of the kind which are made with a heated iron. She waited with hands clasped together until some one came fearlessly toward her, and then she was lifted in Phil’s arms, and then she knew that she was saved.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A VILLAINOUS ATTEMPT.

The rescue of Dora Warren's horse from the quagmire into which he was sinking was a process that took more time than did the rescue of Dora herself, and it was not such a dainty job at that. But the young circus owner knew how to go about it, and had found a way to approach the spot on solid ground. Fortunately, the horse had not sunk very deep. A little encouragement, with a heroic pull at the bridle, accomplished the feat, and once on solid ground Dora disdained to accept of Phil's help to reach the saddle. Not much was said until they were riding side by side back to the point where the roads forked.

"Now we will try being sensible again," said Dora.

"Don't you think that was a sensible thing that I did just now?" Phil asked.

"Not the whole of it. You didn't have to hold my head up in the way you did, and you were slower about it than was necessary. You might have pulled me out more as you did the horse."

"You didn't wear a bridle."

"I had arms, and the horse hasn't."

"You bothered me by getting them around my neck."

"Did I?"

"Didn't you know it?"

"Perhaps I knew at the time, but I'm trying hard to

forget the whole affair as fast as I can. Oh! but it was terrible, though!"

"Having your arms around my neck, or the other thing that I did?"

"Don't talk so, Phil!"

She leaned toward him in her saddle, and their young faces touched, and after that they did not jest about the adventure.

"I started back as soon as I was sure that you couldn't be intending to stay behind us. I began to worry, and waited for Mamie and Eona to come up. Then I made them all dismount at a comfortable spot and started back to find you. I felt rather shaky when I found that you had taken the wrong road, for I didn't know but you would ride into the river. This is a horrible strip of country through here, and I'll be glad enough to get out of it. There, we are at the spot where the roads separate. Now we will make a pace to catch up with the others, for there is a chance that we may miss the first morning trip of the boat."

"What would happen in that case?"

"The other circus would probably get ahead of us."

"Then there is another circus making for the same place?"

Phil told her of the letter he had received from Mr. Carpenter.

"That is why I routed you out at this time of night to go by this route instead of keeping on in the more comfortable way. Did you think I did it just for fun?"

"All I understood about it was that you were afraid you would not get to Charlotte on time by rail."

They soon came up with the other members of the party, and found that Mamie had been amusing herself by racing up and down the sloppy road on her horse and spattering her companions with the muddy water at every chance. Isabel and Eona were on the point of trying to pull her from her horse to give her a ducking when Phil arrived and stopped the sport.

Isabel gave Dora a sharp glance as they came up, and there was a hint of suspicion in it, for it occurred to her jealous mind that Dora might have gotten off the road purposely, so that Phil would come back for her, and so give her a chance to have him all to herself for a time.

But when our hero had told the facts, it was Isabel who first went up to Dora and gave her a hug, with her lips close to her ear.

"You are a dear girl, Dora, and I love you!" she impulsively whispered.

"And you are another, Isabel!" laughed Dora.

An hour later they were at the river landing, and to Phil's intense relief he found that the boat had not started on its first morning trip. For that matter, there was no need of its starting, as it had no cargo, owing to the bad condition of the roads. The water was high, the river having overflowed the lower lands along its course. It swept along its way with a swift, silent, eddying current that had something majestic in it.

Phil had no difficulty in chartering the boat to transport his circus property, or as much of it as the craft

would hold at a time, to Charlotte. It would take an hour or more to make a trip, and another to unload, and there would be none too much time, early as was the hour.

Besides, it was well known to the boatmen that there was another circus on its way down the river from a point farther up, and they were momentarily expecting the other boat to come in sight.

The information made Phil more anxious than ever.

Now that he had found the road to be passable he had no fears as to the safety of the highway part of the journey. And, between watching the river for the expected sight of the steamboat with the rival circus and keeping an eye on the road to catch the first glimpse of his circus teams, Phil was more busy than he would have been if he had really something to do.

He was not long kept in suspense on the score of his own circus, for the trainer with the elephants soon put in an appearance, and then a troop of horses and the cages. The wagons with the canvas and other tent materials began to arrive immediately afterward, and the work of loading on to the steamboat went on rapidly. The captain of the boat called a halt, declaring that not another pound of any kind of freight should be taken aboard.

"The lighter the load the quicker the run," he declared. "And," he added, "if you want to beat the other show in time, we want to get a move on us, for there's the *River Queen* from up the river, and unless I'm mistaken, she has some circus stuff on board of her. Jing! she is steaming up, too!"

Walt and Phil were both on board, and the steamer was

beginning to back out into the river. At the moment a roughly-dressed man, who had come aboard unobserved by Rushington, walked over to the rail and stood watching the other boat with his coat collar turned up and his shoulders shrugged up to his ears, as if he were cold.

It was indeed somewhat chilly. It was past sunrise, yet the sun had not shown itself. There was a mist over the river, and the other steamer was puffing and blowing its way pompously through it, lashing the current into foam.

This stranger at the rail seemed to be deeply interested in the progress of the other boat. As the captain of the one chartered by our hero walked forward Phil noticed that this stranger stopped him, and for a moment he seemed to be greatly excited over something. The captain shook his head, appeared cross, and finally made a gesture and left him.

"Notice that fellow?" Walt questioned.

"Yes. I wonder what he wanted of the captain?"

"I thought it was a request to wait for him to go ashore for something, or to hail the other boat. I'm getting to be quite a detective, you know, doing the spotting for you, and I read motions about as easily as I do print."

"I don't see as there is anything important in it, since it is sure that the captain knows what we want of him. What worries me most is the speed of the two boats—I want to be sure that we get to Charlotte ahead of the other circus."

"What difference will it really make? Your agent has engaged the grounds, of course. If the other show goes

there it will have to take what there is left, and we will have to compete with them for business if they are bound to show on the same day that we do."

"That is all right, Walt, only it isn't the whole of it. There are no really public grounds in Charlotte, and we haven't got to hire any. A license to exhibit was obtained, Mr. Carpenter selected the best available space for the setting up of the tents. No permission or exclusive rights could be hired. That was something that troubled Mr. Carpenter more than a little in one town that we struck, but I didn't realize at the time of how much importance it might be. Indeed, I congratulated myself that we should not have to pay out money for the grounds. Now you see the other show can pitch their tents on the spot selected by my advance agent if it gets there ahead of us."

"I see. Well, we are getting under way, and it seems now to depend a good deal on the speed of the boats. You have given the captain of this boat a full understanding of the situation?"

"Yes. Ah! we are seen on board the other boat, and they seem to be steaming up at a higher rate. It is to be a race. And it doesn't end on the river if we get to the landing at nearly the same time, or the one that gets some canvas first on the grounds will really hold them."

The rough-looking stranger did not linger long at the rail in sight of Phil and Walt. He moved at a swaggering gait toward the opposite end of the boat, and as he passed near where Mamie was standing Phil noticed that she gave him a lingering scrutiny, while he seemed bent upon avoiding her.

A moment afterward he disappeared, and then Mamie followed as if she were bent upon keeping an eye on him.

Walt did not observe this, and Phil attached no importance to it. Both became intensely interested in the race between the two river boats, which had now fairly begun.

The *River Queen* was the faster boat of the two, but it was heavier laden. It looked as if an attempt had been made to get the whole of the other circus property on board of her, besides a partial cargo of other goods. Evidently the circus was a "one-horse" affair, as it would have to be if the whole of it was on the river boat.

But with the lighter cargo the leading boat was making the faster time—or, at least, maintaining the lead. Both were doing their best already, and as they were going with the current, they were making excellent time.

But Rushington was doubtful of the result. He started in search of the captain to urge him to win the race at any cost. Walt remained at a point whence he could watch the progress of the pursuing boat.

At that moment there was a shrill cry that rang from end to end of the boat. Phil recognized the voice of Mamie, and he ran in the direction whence the cry seemed to come.

It took him well aft, past the bales of canvas and other circus property, past the cages and wagons which were ranged close together, to a narrow space shut off from the sight of any who might be at any other point on the boat. And there he saw Mamie struggling with the rough

stranger, and near them a heap of hastily kindled combustibles which were just leaping into flame.

There was a shout from Phil, a cry from Mamie, a growling ejaculation from the man, and then the girl was released and the ruffian made a break for liberty. At the same time Walt dashed past, coat in hand, and began beating out the fire with the garment.

Our hero caught up a rope's end, seized the man by the collar and cried :

“You whip the fire, Walt—I'll thrash the villain!”

CHAPTER XXXVII.

CONTROLLING THE CROWD.

It was no child's play that Phil had undertaken in his part of the contract. The "villain" whom he had agreed to thrash was powerful of frame and ugly of temper. In addition, he speedily demonstrated skill in wrestling.

He did not know how to use his fists with any effect; but he closed with the young showman before the latter could apply the rope's end with any vigor. Mamie stood back and watched them, and Walt, with a few whips with his coat extinguished the blaze. A boatman came running up and would have tried to separate the combatants with perfect impartiality.

Walt pulled him back.

"You don't have to interfere," he said.

"No fighting on the boat," said the fellow.

"Just one little fight till that scoundrel is thrashed, and then it will be as you say."

"Eh! it is the owner of the circus, isn't it?" the boatman exclaimed, for the first time recognizing Rushington as one of those engaged in the scuffle.

"Yes, and the other had kindled a fire here to burn up boat, circus and all. Look there!"

As Walt spoke he trod upon a tiny blaze which he had failed to quite extinguish. The boatman began to comprehend that it was a case where there was no defense for the man who was engaged with Phil Rushington.

"Let me get hold of him!" he exclaimed.

"I don't think my friend will need any help," said Walt.

The boatman was a heavy, slow-moving man, good at lifting, but innocent of science. He waddled up to the combatants and the ruffian who had kindled the fire saw him coming. For the moment our hero had his hands full, for his antagonist had the under hold. The stranger suddenly swung out with his left, and the boatman went down as if he had been shot.

Mamie, realizing that the danger was averted, began to enjoy the fight. She would not have liked to see Phil go down like that; but a boatman down was as good as a boatman standing, so far as she was concerned, and she clapped her hands, and spun on her toes.

"All down but two!" she cried. "Set 'em up again!"

Then she subsided to observe the struggle, which had settled down into a wrestling match of no common order. Our hero knew something about wrestling, and it was a long time since he had been thrown. But he found the man he had tackled was an expert in the art, and that he was strong and heavy in the bargain.

In wrestling, other things being equal, the heavier man has an advantage. He is harder to lift, and his cumbersome weight makes him hard to swing. He has a surer footing. And in this match the stranger was far the heavier.

That was why the encounter lasted so long. Walt began to grow anxious when he saw that Phil was being swung to and fro, while the other held his footing.

"Don't be easy with him!" warned Walt, fearing that Phil might put off his supreme effort until too late.

"Rush isn't one of the aisy koind," assured Mamie.

"That fellow is heavy as a pig and he knows how to wrestle."

"Me own money is up on the lightweight, just the same."

"Look out—look out, Rush!" cried Walt, for at the moment it seemed that the stranger would lift Phil off his feet. But it was a false alarm. The young circus owner was merely feinting, to throw his opponent off his guard.

By this time the boatman was on his feet, and a hint of the affair had been noised over the boat, bringing others of the crew and members of Phil's company troop-ing to the spot.

Dora Warren and Isabel were among them, and Burt Wister, the versatile "tramp" performer who had been several months with the show, followed them. While they were rattling questions at the head of Walt Arkwright, they heard something fall.

Walt usually had an abundance of confidence in Phil Rushington. Yet he was surprised to see that it was not his friend who had come to grief. The advantage a moment before had been so manifestly on the side of the stranger that Walt feared that for once Phil had found more than his match. Had it been an encounter with fists Arkwright would not have doubted the outcome.

It was the stranger who fell, nevertheless, and a perfect roar went up from the spectators. By this time it was known that the unknown man had tried to set the boat on

fire, and as the men saw him lying at the feet of Rushington several made a dash for him, and there were ugly threats in the air.

"Pitch him into the river!" yelled one.

"No—give us the rope, and we'll make a noose for his neck!" said another.

"Never let him off the boat alive!" came from a third.

The ruffian had been stunned by his fall, for his head had struck on the deck. But the grumble of threatening voices, and a glimpse of angry faces and gestures aroused him, and he sprang to his feet.

"Catch him—down with him!"

Four stalwart boatmen closed in. The stranger glared back at them in terror. At the same time a pistol appeared in his hand.

"Look out!" cried Wister.

At the same time other revolvers came into sight, and in a moment the ruffian would have started a shooting game in sheer desperation, for he knew enough of the temper of the crowd with which he was surrounded to realize that his life would be worthless if they got their hands onto him.

The pistol was knocked out of his hand, and it fell on the deck. It was Rushington who did it; and it was he who snatched the weapon from where it lay, and it was his voice that rang above the swelling sounds of wrath.

"Back, gentlemen! No shooting!"

The command was coolly spoken, and the confident and commanding mien of the young showman carried authority and demanded obedience.

"Did that chap try to fire the boat?" demanded one.

"That remains to be proved. But he must have fair play. I will stand responsible for his safe keeping until we reach the landing. Call the captain, Wister."

The acrobat hesitated. It looked to him as though Phil might need him, for the boatmen were not inclined to subside from the hostile stand they had taken.

"He'll be along in a jiffy, I reckon," said Wister.

"A jiffy is too long to wait. Call him instantly."

Burt Wister sent an appealing glance at Walt, and the latter understood. The acrobat had been in that region before and understood the temper of the men with whom they had to deal. He knew that Phil would stand his ground, even if the crowd demanded that he surrender the ruffian to them under penalty of beginning to shoot if he refused.

Walt stepped quietly to the side of Phil. Then Barrows, one of the clowns, followed suit.

"Hand the boat burner over, or we'll take him," growled the boatman, who had been knocked down by the stranger.

Mamie, meanwhile, had been looking keenly at the man whom our hero had vanquished in wrestling, and whom he was now protecting from the wrath of the crowd. She suddenly glided up to Phil.

"Rush, that is the man that rubbered at ye at the station and made oies at me!" she exclaimed.

"Who is the man?"

"The wan that would have burned the boat."

"Are you sure, Mamie?"

"As sure as Oi am thot it is yourself thot Oi'm looking at this minute."

"That shows that he was on the watch for us, and that it was to detain or to ruin me that he would have burned the boat."

"Thot's what Oi was thinking."

Phil spoke in a low tone to Walt.

"Take that piece of rope and tie the scoundrel's hands. If he resists I'll hit him over the head with the butt of his own pistol!"

Walt had the rope in his hand, and had begun to execute the order before Rushington had ceased speaking. Our hero turned again to the crowd, which was now made up of all the boatmen who were not actually engaged in the work of running the boat.

"This man," he said, speaking in an even tone that carried conviction with it, "had no motive in burning the boat except to destroy the cargo which belongs to me. I never saw him before, therefore he must have been hired to burn up my property, or to delay the boat, so that the other with which we are making a race for the landing would win. So you see it is important that I know the truth, and it is for me to deal with him. You need have no fears of his getting away, for I am bound to have the truth out of him before he goes. He shall get his deserts, never fear."

There was a grumbling response to this speech; but it was not without effect. One of the men counseled his companions not to interfere; and while they were arguing the point, the captain, who had been busy directing the

attempt of the boat to outstrip the *River Queen* in the race, appeared.

"Back to your business! Clear!" he sharply ordered, as he came up.

Not a man of them dared to refuse. Meanwhile Walt had secured the hands of the ruffian, who had been so terrified by the threats of the boatmen that he had no nerve to resist.

Rushington acquainted the captain with the circumstances in a few words.

"You ought to have let the men had him, and done for him! It is the only way to deal with his sort!" snapped the captain.

"I claim the privilege of seeing justice done while I am getting at the facts, Captain Hackett," said Phil, quietly, "and you must not allow your men to interfere."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

FIRST STAGE OF THE RACE.

The race on the river had reached an exciting stage.

Captain Hackett yielded to the demands of Phil in the matter of the temporary disposition of the man who had been detected in the act of setting fire to the boat. Indeed, the young circus owner had a knack of bringing people to his terms in most things which he was resolved upon.

The prisoner gave his name as Neil Dustin, but he would not at the time tell anything more about himself. The race between the river boats was so critical just then that Phil did not wish to spend the time to question the stranger until it was certain as to which one of the two boats should first reach the landing.

It appeared that the one in pursuit had made a gain on its rival. It was by this time so close that Phil could distinctly see the persons on the other boat who were in the forward part and also eagerly marking the relative rates of progress of the two boats.

Among the persons so stationed Rushington noted one who looked familiar. The man stood with his face partly averted, but he seemed to be speaking to another who stood near, and making peculiar gestures. These, too, reminded Phil of the motions of some one whom he had known in some unpleasant connection, which at the moment he could not recall.

But he was not long in doubt. Walt came up and said:

"Isn't that man Joseph Q. Saunders the man who persuaded Norman Carpenter to embezzle and invest your money in a wildcat scheme, at the time that your dramatic troupe was broken up?"

"It is—it is!" cried Rush.

"And when we last heard of him, wasn't he connected with the organization of a new circus combination, and didn't he try to hire Isabel away from you?"

"Of course. That is too recent a happening for me to have forgotten any part of it."

"Well, then it means——"

"That the circus that is trying to beat us in the run to Charlotte is under the management of my particular enemy. That explains everything, including the attempt to set fire to this boat. That Joseph Saunders is the worst snake-in-the-grass living! Yes, he would have burned up my circus property, just for the sake of beating me! I will have the truth about this thing, if I have to choke it out of Neil Dustin with a noose around his neck! I'll throw him over to the mercy of the boat hands if he doesn't tell the truth and the whole truth."

Hoot—hoot! blared the whistle of the *River Queen*. Swash—swash! sounded her paddles, now so close that they could hardly be distinguished from the sound of those of the leading boat.

"They're going to win the race after all!" said Walt, who was really more miserable in his anxiety than was Rushington himself.

Captain Hackett came running up.

"We'll win, but it is a close shave," he cried.

"How is that? The *Queen* is gaining."

"Let her gain."

"What do you mean?"

"In three minutes we will be at the landing at Charlotte!"

"That's so? Good! But won't they overtake us, even in that time? And if they are only a minute behind us it will be a close shave for us to get on to the grounds ahead of them. I don't see as we have the advantage of them to an extent worth shouting over."

"There's only one wharf where the circus property can be unloaded safely. We are ahead, and we don't let the other fellow get ahead of us?"

"Good! But can you help his getting the lead?"

"Why, sure, Mr. Rushington. By refusing to make way for him to pass us. There, he is going to try. Now see us get in his way and bring down upon us the wrath of the pilot."

Hackett's pilot had his instructions, and the man at the helm had his. The *River Queen* veered to the left of the other boat, bent on passing her. But Hackett's boat ran out in the same direction, so as to cross the other's bow. There was danger to both in such maneuvering, for the current was strong and allowance had to be made for its force in calculating so as to avoid a collision.

Rushington's people were all on the watch, and there was a murmur of applause when they recognized the purpose of the maneuver. The *River Queen* had to slow up—

had to reverse her paddles—then to be thrown broadside to the current.

There was a narrow escape from a collision as it was. But the leading boat, having a clear way ahead of her, did not have to slacken her speed. As a consequence, the pursuer having checked her headway, the leader gained several lengths on a spurt. This was not all. The *Queen* had swung out of the main channel and the risk worked against her, as it was bound to do.

“She will go aground! she’s grinding on the mud bar already!” yelled a voice.

“Keep off! keep off!” shouted Saunders, waving his arms frantically.

“Let her dredge the river if she likes!” chuckled Captain Hackett.

Mamie had been observing the whole affair in silent interest, and at this moment she recognized Joseph Saunders. A derisive laugh rang from her lips, and he turned and recognized her standing with Isabel close to the rail.

The creases in his face, which had been made by long years of much smiling and pretense of good nature, deepened. But it was a savage leer instead of a smile that met the gaze of the two girls.

“Bah!” he cried, hoarse with wrath. And that was all he could summon voice to speak at the instant, as he shook his fists at them.

“Come ahn, Joey!” cried Mamie, defiantly.

Isabel was laughing, Mamie was imitating the wrathful gesticulations of Saunders, Dora Warren was looking

anxious, and Burt Wister proceeded to strike an attitude in full sight of everybody on board of the other boat, and to swallow a sword, working his jaw as if he were making a breakfast off the blade and greatly enjoying the repast.

Meanwhile the *River Queen* was in trouble, and she would have many minutes of it before she could swing clear of the mud bar. Her rival forged ahead, hooting exultantly at every turn of her paddles, churning the yellow river current, and making straight and safe for the largest pier at the foot of the town of Charlotte.

Morning had dawned, and the mist was lifting from the river. The birds in the trees on the opposite shore were twittering clamorously as the sky reddened with the flush of dawn.

As Captain Hackett's boat ran her nose up to the pier the rising sun burst through the mist, glinting the church spires and roofs, and even the dingy chimneys of the town with gold; and to Phil Rushington it seemed like a presage of success for him.

"The first stage of the race is won, old man!" he exclaimed, as Walt came up.

"It'll be the same with all the other stages. It is bound to turn out that way with everything that Phil Rushington tackles, no matter what and no matter how."

"Don't say that, Walt," said Phil, gravely. And into his eyes there came a look which seemed almost to be one of foreboding.

"Why not say it? It is true."

"It isn't true."

“Don’t you come out on top about every time, with all kinds of people trying to pull you down?”

“I am human, and there is a Power greater than luck or fate that rules. We mustn’t forget that!”

Walt clasped the hand of his chum in silence.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

FIRST ON THE GROUNDS.

The race was not over. The *River Queen* was swinging and splashing in a vain attempt to get off the mud bar, while the rival steamer backed up alongside the pier with complacent ease. But there was a man on the pursuing boat who would not give up so long as there was the shadow of a chance to win, by fair means or foul.

Joseph Saunders was a queer character. He was a man to win friends, and sometimes he seemed to possess qualities which were worthy to be admired. He was shrewd, and he had in his day done things which seemed to be generous and fair. But he had not a friend in the world whom he would not "throw down" if it seemed at the time to be for his selfish interest to do so.

With the boat stranded, and uncertainty as to the time required to get clear of the mud bar, Saunders was none the less determined to get onto the circus grounds at Charlotte ahead of Rushington.

A rowboat, manned by three stout oarsmen, and containing Saunders and two members of his company, put out from the steamer on the side most distant from the other boat. Before a man from the latter had set foot on the pier Phil saw the rowboat shoot past, and Joseph Saunders was the first man from either boat to spring ashore.

"Walt, we must make a break for the grounds, and get

on to them ahead of that man at any cost!" exclaimed Phil.

He did not wait for a word from his companion. He needed none. They sprang ashore together, and their horses followed soon after. The landing was deserted, for the hour was too early for anybody to be astir.

A bundle of stakes for staking out the spot to be covered by the tents were taken by Walt, and this was all the property that they tried to take with them. What was needed was something to make a show of being ahead, to entitle them to the ground, and the stakes would be enough.

Saunders was out of sight, and as he could not land a horse, he was, of course, at a disadvantage unless he should be fortunate enough to find a team or horse on the street that could be taken to get him over the ground at a rate faster than a footpace.

It had been said that Saunders was at a disadvantage; but it should be added that some kinds of men are never at a disadvantage, since they have within themselves the energy to overcome every kind of obstacle. That energy is better as a possession than any advantage of wealth, position or other endowment. Energy will create opportunities when none exist, and make the most of the limited chances that may be presented.

Joseph Saunders, with all his faults and iniquities, was filled with that sort of energy. He could command a regiment and wheedle any kind of service out of one whom he could not command. So, as he strode furiously up on the deserted principal street of the town it was with

a determination to reach the circus grounds ahead of Rushington, no matter if the latter were ahead of him at the start.

He saw a colored boy lazily grooming a handsome horse in front of a door. The horse was young and restive. He was bridled, probably because he had a habit of breaking away with only a halter on. It was just the sort of horse Saunders was looking for, and Joseph Q. Saunders strode up and stuck out a thumb and forefinger, holding a silver dollar.

"Say, you just step in and get me a drink of water, will you?" he said. "This dollar is yours—maybe you dropped it—and you needn't hurry about getting out with the water, either."

The boy stared with eyes big as saucers.

"Start your legs, and mind what I say, will you!"

Saunders jammed the dollar into the black hand, and then smartly cuffed the black ear which was nearest. The double inducement could not be resisted, and the boy scampered off after the water, with his stupid wits in a maze.

Saunders let him get out of sight; then he sprang on to the horse, reached down and jabbed a pin into the animal's flank, and was off like the wind.

He turned the first corner, and succeeded in pulling the horse up before another stable where a boy was also grooming a horse. This boy was whiter than the other, but not quite white, except his eyes and teeth.

"Sho! boss, you—you got Marse Granby's hawse!" exclaimed the lad.

"I've bought it. I'm the circus man, and I buy all the fine horses I see. Tell me where the circus grounds are, will you? Where the show was last year, I mean?"

"Dere wa'n't no circus las' year, boss."

"I meant year before last, of course. I forget things. Where do they always set up the circus tents? Tell me that. Here's a dollar I found out here, and I guess it must be yours. Quick about it."

"Why, boss, yo' see," began the boy, but Saunders reached for his ear, found it, and held on.

"Point out to me just where I will find the circus ground or I take your ear, and you don't get the dollar! Now, warble!"

The little groom gave the direction, and with remarkable explicitness. The "circus man" was off like a comet, and out of sight before the boy had a chance to comprehend what had happened. And this time Saunders rewarded the boy for the assistance by a cruel pinch of the ear, and omitted to give him the dollar.

"That'll teach him that it isn't safe to trust strangers—a valuable lesson for any boy to learn!" said Saunders.

It was not far to the grounds, and he had made such good speed that he was confident of being ahead of the young proprietor of the rival circus.

Therefore, he did not press the horse quite so hard for speed. He felt happy—quite in a rollicking mood, indeed—and sang and whistled, proving at the same time that he had some of the art of a cowboy as a rider of a spirited horse without a saddle.

He so reached a short, narrow bridle path leading

through a fringe of trees, beyond which lay the open grounds which were the only ones available in the vicinity of the town for the exhibition of a tent show.

He reached the end of the path, and then heard the sound of pounding—or thumping—either like that of a horseman or some one driving a stake. A moment after he saw the open field—and there was some one driving a stake!

The words which poured in a limpid stream from his lips would not have been suitable to “drink in.” He plunged the convenient pin, which he used in place of spurs, to the head in the flesh of the horse, and the latter, with a scream of pain, performed an antic that sent the scoundrel to the earth.

Without a rider, the horse raced away across the narrow plain, and Saunders, with a shoulder that felt as if it were broken, and with a bleeding scratch across one cheek, staggered to his feet and stared after the fleeing horse. He was bewildered and half stunned, but the sight of Phil Rushington and Walt Arkwright, of the Rushington Circus, brought to him a revival of his energy and ugliness.

The young showman and his chum were not a hundred yards distant from the spot where Saunders had been thrown. There was pain in every joint of his body, there was an eating, burning rage in his soul. He did not heed the bodily pain, for it only intensified his passion against Phil Rushington, and it helped him to cover the intervening distance quicker, if anything.

He reached a row of stakes which they had already

driven, and began pulling them up and throwing them into the air as if they were noxious weeds which had been found in a garden of flowers. He had thus disposed of half a dozen before Rush really had time to comprehend what was happening.

Then Saunders received a check. It was the hand of Phil on his shoulder, and then the proprietors of the rival shows clinched, wrestled furiously for a brief time, and then Saunders went down again.

He would have sprung up and renewed the fight, for he was in a desperately reckless mood. But Rushington had noted the almost insane glare in the man's eyes, and comprehended the meaning of it. Phil had a wild temper of his own, which he had been struggling for several years to control, and he knew that no man in that condition was responsible for what he might do. It was a moment when his assailant must be controlled at any cost.

As Saunders half regained his feet, Phil saw his hand go to his hip pocket in a significant way. But the hand did not withdraw a weapon, for he was on his back again before he had time to do so, and under a blow from Rushington's fist.

"Walt," called our hero, "I have caught the Tartar! What will I do with him?"

As Walt came hurrying to the scene of the fray, Rush bent down, jerked the half-drawn revolver from Saunders' pocket and threw it into the bushes as far as he could.

"You might better have kept that, old man," said Walt, watching the flight of the weapon.

"I didn't want to trust myself with it. In anger a man

is liable to do a good many things which he would regret in a cooler moment, and merely having the means for murder about him often leads to it. I don't care to trust myself any more than I would trust that man there."

"That last blow must have been a hard one. Is he badly hurt, do you think?"

"If he is," answered Phil, "it was not so much due to the blow I dealt him as to the fall from the horse."

After being struck down by the young showman, Saunders had lain quietly, never so much as moving a muscle. The young circus owner knelt beside him and was about to lay a hand on his heart—for the utter stillness of the man gave rise to something like alarm—when the closed eyelids twitched suddenly apart.

"He's worth a dozen dead men yet," remarked Walt. "Look out for him, Phil. We know from experience what a desperate villain he is."

Phil knew, however, that he would have no trouble in dealing with the fellow now that he was disarmed.

"Lie still, Joseph Saunders," he commanded, a menacing glitter in his blue eyes. "You see, I know you, and I am sure you have not forgotten me."

"Certainly not," returned Saunders, a wily smile overspreading his face. "This race of ours is something of a neck-and-neck affair, Rushington."

"Some men never know when they're beaten," was the grim rejoinder, "and you must be one of that kind."

"Tush! The race isn't always to the swift, and you're a good ways from the wire yet. What will you give me to cancel my date in this town?"

"Not a cent. It's as good as canceled already."

"If that's a conundrum, I give it up. What's the answer?"

"There's only one available site for a show in this entire town of Charlotte. We are on the ground, and have driven our stakes, so you might just as well keep on and fill your next date, wherever it happens to be. Unless," with a wink at Walt, "you want to pitch your tents here to-morrow, and try for the business we leave."

"This town ain't big enough for two shows, Rushington, nor for a two-days' run. You know that as well as I do. This is no time to air our past grievances. The whole thing simmers down to this: If I don't show here, you don't—unless you do the square thing by me."

"What do you mean, you villain?" demanded our hero, who was rapidly losing his patience.

"I mean just what I say," responded Saunders, with one of his snaky smiles. "My men back there on the *Queen* have their orders. They know what to do."

"Yes," put in Walt, angrily, "and so do we know what to do. Phil, we've got this scoundrel in our hands, and it may be that we can handle his show through him in spite of what he says about his men aboard the *River Queen* having their orders."

"My idea exactly!" declared Rush. "He is responsible for his men, and if they commit any depredations, or indulge in any lawlessness, he can be called to account for it jointly with them. Time is wearing swiftly, and our pick-and-shovel gang ought to be here any minute. As for Saunders, we'll tie him and keep him a prisoner over

there in the woods—a hostage for the good behavior of his show outfit. Roll over on your face, Saunders, hands behind your back.”

“Not much,” growled Saunders. “You ain’t so high and mighty, Phil Rushington, and are no better in the eyes of the law than I am. You can’t make prisoners out of people, in this town, without some excuse for doing it.”

“Excuse!” retorted Phil. “Haven’t we excuse enough? Didn’t one of your men board Captain Hackett’s boat and try to fire it? You know who I mean—Neil Dustin.”

Saunders started slightly and rolled his shifty eyes in Phil’s direction.

“That’s excuse enough to get you behind the bars,” chipped in Walt, “and tie up your one-horse combination for a while waiting for you to get out.”

“Bah!” sneered the ruffian. “You’ll have to prove that Dustin is my man and tried to fire your boat on my order. I can tell you now that I don’t know anything about him. You lay hands on me at your own peril. I dare you to touch me!”

“Don’t push me too far or you’ll regret it,” answered our hero, sternly. “Tie him, Walt. Take off his suspenders and tie his hands at his back.”

Walt started in cheerfully to comply, but Saunders, bruised and racked with pain though he was, threw up his arms and clasped them rigidly about Walt’s waist as he bent over him.

This move was not so desperate as it might seem, for Saunders had been dallying with his rivals and hoping for aid in the persons of Reddy and Big Bill, respectively his

ticket agent and general utility man, who had come ashore with him from the stranded *Queen*.

Reddy and Bill had been left near the stable where Saunders had forcibly taken the horse, and the ruffian knew well that his henchmen would follow him post-haste.

While half reclining on his back and talking with Rushington, Saunders caught a covert glimpse of Reddy reconnoitering the situation among the bushes and taking possession of the revolver which the young showman had hurled from him a few moments previously.

So, when the all but baffled showman made his move, he knew his lurking men would hasten to his aid, and that he might succeed in turning the tables on his captors.

"He wants more of the same medicine you dosed him with a while back, Rush," panted Walt, struggling with Saunders.

"We haven't any more time to fool away on him," answered the young circus owner, dropping down beside Walt and grasping the arms of their prisoner. "Jerk off his braces and tie his wrists while I hold him."

So busy were the two friends that they neither heard nor saw the two forms that sprang out of the undergrowth and sprinted swiftly across the plain; consequently the furious and unexpected attack engineered by Reddy and Big Bill was temporarily successful.

The newcomers, especially Bill, were brawny fellows, and of a piece with their lawless employer. Reddy grappled with Walt, and Bill hurled himself like a catamount at Rushington.

The attack was from the rear, and before either Walt or Phil realized what had happened, or just how it had been done, each was being pinned to the ground.

"Just in the nick of time, boys!" exclaimed Saunders, a look of sinister satisfaction overspreading his face.

In the joy of the moment, he forgot his bruises, sprang quickly to his feet, snatched the revolver from Reddy, and ran to the assistance of Big Bill. Phil had begun a fierce struggle to free himself, and Saunders knew too much about the young showman's muscular arms to feel entire confidence in the prowess of his utility man.

"Easy, Rushington!" gritted Saunders, pressing the muzzle of his weapon against Phil's temple. "Turn about is fair play, and it strikes me that here's where I get my innings. If the rest of my fellows follow out my instructions down at the pier, the chances are good for my tents going up here instead of yours. You intended to handle my show through me. That's a pointer, and I'm going to handle your show through you. The only difference in the situation is that I've got a double cinch on the matter, so to speak, since there are two of you and only one of me. No, I guess I won't cancel my date. It will be Mossman & Rushington who cancel theirs."

"You haven't got any of your stuff on the ground yet," returned Rush, speaking with difficulty, because of the heavy knee on his chest.

He was not a little taken aback at this coup on the part of Saunders' men. One thing he could not understand, and that was the failure of his own laborers to arrive on the scene and begin operations. This thought in

mind, he shifted his eyes to the highroad leading through the town, and to the river along which his wagons were to come. Saunders saw the look and laughed harshly.

"Don't expect any reinforcements, Rushington," he said, with an evil leer. "My men will see to it that none arrive."

"I wouldn't feel too sure about that," was Phil's cool rejoinder.

Even as he voiced the words a pattering fall of hoofs was heard, and four horsemen broke into view, made note of the little drama being enacted on the plain, and rode straight for the actors.

Three men and a colored boy comprised the party. They were strangers to Phil, being undoubtedly townspeople, but he liked their looks and knew they must certainly range themselves on his side.

One of the horsemen was tall, of dignified appearance, and wore an iron-gray beard. He was a distinguished-looking man, and was evidently the leader. The other three men were more ordinary looking—one being short and fat and puffing heavily from the jolting of their rapid ride.

"They mean business right up to the hilt, Joe," muttered Big Bill as he eyed the swiftly-approaching party.

"I guess you're right there," was Saunders' grim response.

"The little nigger is pointing his way at you."

"So I see."

"Does he know you?"

"Probably he thinks he does."

Big Bill was beginning to lose his courage.

"The best thing for us to do is to cut and run," he averred, with a wild look toward the woods. "To be caught here, like this, is a dead give-away."

"To run would be a worse give-away."

"For Heaven's sake put up that gun. The very sight of it——"

Big Bill got no further.

At that precise moment Phil upset him and sprang erect, grabbing Saunders by the hand that held the revolver as he did so.

This move was a signal for Walt to do likewise, and Reddy, sharing some of the fright of Big Bill, allowed himself to be brushed aside without serious resistance.

"Make a run of it!" called Bill, starting for the timber.

The suggestion was most agreeable to Reddy, and he ducked under Arkwright's extended arm and sped along in the trail of the utility man.

"Stop those fellows!" shouted the tall man, pointing toward the fleeing ruffians. "By gad, there's crooked work here, and we'll sift it to the bottom." Two of the three men who had accompanied him spurred after Reddy and Big Bill, and the tall man turned upon Rush and Saunders, drawing rein beside them. "Guns, eh?" he muttered, "and in a peaceable, law-abiding community like this!"

"By gum," put in the little fat man, "carryin' concealed weapons is ag'in the ordinance, an' that there chap could be fined!"

"That weapon doesn't appear to be concealed, Blowker,"

said the tall man, dryly. Then he turned his calm, dark eyes on Rush and Walt. "What is the meaning of this, gentlemen?" he asked.

"I and this man," answered Phil, shaking Saunders' arm as he spoke, "are the proprietors of rival shows. As this seems to be the only available site for our tents, we had a race for the place. My friend and I succeeded in getting here first, and were driving our stakes when this man set upon us with a revolver. Later he was joined by two of his men—the fellows being brought back by the two horsemen there."

The tall man looked away to where Reddy and Bill were being hauled back by their collars. This spectacle apparently fired Saunders with indignation.

"What right have you to lay hands on me or my men?" he demanded, hotly. "We have rights here, and shall see that they are respected."

"You'll get your rights without any trouble," answered the tall man, with a withering look. "I've brought along Mr. Blowker, here, to attend to that very thing. Mr. Blowker, sir, is the city marshal."

Saunders turned pale, but he was no stranger to tight situations, and his nerve did not forsake him.

"And what have I to do with the city marshal, may I ask?" he queried.

"I don't know what you have to do with the city marshal, but I'm tolerably well informed as to what the city marshal and his assistants have to do with you."

"And who do you happen to be?"

"I happen to be Colonel Granby, mayor of this town,

and you happen to be the thief who ran off a horse belonging to me. The horse ran back to my stable a good deal the worse for your treatment, sir, and, by gad, if there's any law in this town, and I think there is, I'll make you suffer for what you've done."

Had Joseph Q. Saunders known he was taking liberties with the mayor's live stock, it is possible he might have sought other means for reaching the show grounds.

"Quilp!" called Colonel Granby, half turning in his saddle.

"Yissuh," answered the colored boy, riding forward.

"You're positive that's the man who ran off with Cæsar, are you? Take a good look at him."

The boy peered steadily into Saunders' face for an instant.

"Reckon ah couldn't fo'git him nohow, Marse Granby. Ah had a knockdown tuh him, dat's whut ah had, an' hit ain't possible fo' me tuh disremember dat, no sah."

"All right, Quilp," said the colonel, "fall back." The darky backed his horse to the rear, and his master went on, addressing himself to Saunders, "so you've got a show on the river, eh? With a man like you at its head it must be a fake, pure and simple. I wouldn't let you show here if you had secured the site first. If you've already secured your license, just consider it revoked." The colonel pulled himself up stiffly in his saddle. "Blowker," he said, and finished by nodding his head at Saunders.

The marshal understood and took the beaten showman in tow even as his assistants had secured Big Bill and Reddy. Just before they were marched off, Saunders cast

one fiery, malignant glance at Rushington, but it was the glance of a baffled man, stinging under defeat, and Phil heeded it not a whit.

When the officers and their prisoners were gone the colonel turned genially on the young showman.

"This is Mr. Rushington, if I mistake not?" he said, extending his hand.

"The same, Colonel Granby," answered our hero, giving the mayor's hand a cordial clasp.

"I met your gentlemanly advance agent, Mr. Norman, when he was here," continued the colonel, "and he told me something about you. What he said increases the pleasure of this meeting. I have also heard a little about the trouble you experienced in getting to Charlotte. I am sorry you ran afoul of such luck, and you may count on me to do whatever I can to make the remainder of your brief stay among us as pleasant as possible. As for our friend of the rival combination, I assure you that you have nothing further to fear from him."

With a pleasant smile and wave of the hand, the colonel rode off, followed by his diminutive groom.

"Rushington's luck!" laughed Walt. "On top again, as usual. Hooray!"

"Don't crow too soon, old man," answered Phil, with a troubled look down the road in the direction from which he was expecting his stake and canvas vans. "The wagons haven't shown up yet, and I'm afraid there's trouble."

"What if there is trouble?" scoffed the exultant Walt. "The mayor's on our side, and the whole town is back

of us. The result of all this trouble will merely be a lot of free advertising. I'll bet the canvas won't be able to hold the crowds!"

"Well, while you are jubilating, I'll just get into the saddle and gallop back to the pier and find out what's caused the blockade. We'll have to do some hurricane hustling to get the tents up and everything in shape in time for the parade."

A few moments after the young circus owner was on the back of his saddle horse, pushing swiftly toward the town. He had not covered more than a hundred yards of his journey when he saw Mamie, his reckless rider, careering toward him on her pony.

"Arrah, the luck of it!" she exclaimed, breathlessly, as they drew their horses to a halt side by side in the road.

"What's wrong, Mamie?" demanded Phil, positive from the troubled look on the girl's face that there was something wrong at the river.

"Sure, Rushy, an' they're at it hammer-and-tongs, our b'ys an' the spalpeens that train wid Joey Saunders—bad cess to him. Ye're needed, darlint, an' needed bad."

Our hero waited for no more, but clapped spurs to his horse and dashed for the pier. Mamie, whirling her pony, followed close on his heels, keeping up with his wild pace, stride for stride.

CHAPTER XL.

TROUBLE AT THE LANDING.

On leaving the stranded *River Queen* to make his race for the show grounds, Saunders had left a man named Bud Christopher in charge of his interests.

Christopher was a man of shady reputation and ill-omened visage. He hailed from some part of the great West, was a silent partner of Saunders, and was known to be fully as brutal and desperate.

Before going over the side of the *Queen*, Saunders had instructed Christopher to block the landing of Rushington's show if he could, and to harass him in every way possible. Lawless work could not have been intrusted in better hands, and the skipper of the *River Queen*, having a pique at Captain Hackett, and being thoroughly incensed at the manner in which the *Queen* had been grounded, was ready to play his part in any scheme which would not really endanger his own vessel.

The sight of Rushington's people systematically preparing to land from their safely-moored steamer while the *Queen* was listing heavily to port on a sandbar, stirred all on the latter ship to the deepest depths of their ruffianly natures.

The three boatmen who had rowed Saunders, Big Bill and Reddy ashore had been promised five dollars each by Christopher if they could succeed, before returning, in cutting the rear cable of Hackett's boat. While they were

skulking at this piece of underhand work, all hands on the *Queen* were toiling to get clear of the bar.

Every pound of steam that the boilers would stand was worked up, and a hawser was made fast to the stern, carried ashore and thrown about a tree. Then began the work known as "warping," every pair of hands that could be spared laying hold of the hawser that encircled the tree. The men at the rope strained bow-wards while the paddle blades backed water furiously. But in vain. The *Queen* seemed to be stuck hard and fast and would not move an inch. Those on the other boat took due notice of the *Queen's* failure to get off, and catcalls, groans and derisive yells came from Rushington's men, and from Eona, Mamie and Isabel went up a chorus of mocking cries and laughter.

Dora took no part in the demonstration, for her heart and mind were away on the road with Phil. She had seen Saunders put off from the other boat, and she knew he had left it with the firm intention of baffling Rush at the very moment when success was almost within his grasp. She had no fears for Phil so far as failure was concerned, but what if Saunders' evil nature should impel him to commit some desperate deed against her hero, for surely she could name Phil thus in her own heart. The thought was well-nigh unbearable to Dora, and she anxiously awaited the time when she and the other girls could disembark with their horses and hasten to the show grounds.

Stung by the mockery of Rushington's people, those on the *Queen* redoubled their exertions to get out of their

dilemma. To this end the only "bull" in Saunders' menagerie was made fast to the rope and set to pulling along the sloping deck. The bull, the boatmen and the straining boilers proved too much for the sandbar and the steamer backed off with a jump that threw the elephant to its knees and upset every man at the hawser. The boat was clear, however, and all on board were jubilant.

Christopher's good nature was still further increased by the return of the three men who had rowed Saunders, Big Bill and Reddy ashore. They brought the information that they had succeeded in cutting the stern cable of the rival boat unknown to any one aboard her.

"They've got their tool and canvas wagons off," remarked Christopher to the *Queen's* captain, "and are putting on the horses. If possible, let's create a diversion and delay those wagons."

"We can do it," averred the other, with a snap of his lantern-like jaws. "Will you and your men stand by to board if I lay alongside?"

And Christopher peered into the skipper's glittering eyes, being somewhat in doubt as to whether the boatman meant what he said. One look and all doubt was dissipated.

"You get us alongside," whispered Christopher, hoarsely, "and I'll take care of the rest."

Thereupon the captain went up into the pilot house and himself took the wheel, while Saunders' "silent partner" passed a quick word among the rough horde that comprised both crew and show employees.

The first thing Rushington's ringmaster and man in charge knew, the *River Queen* was shoving herself alongside Hackett's boat, a row of men armed with tent pins hanging over the lee rail.

"This way, every mother's son of you!" yelled Grout, waving his hand toward the canvasmen and laborers who were making ready to start with the wagons. "This way, I say, and let each man bring a club! Look alive, now! Boarders, repel boarders!"

In an instant, all the neat and orderly system that characterized the work of Rushington's men was thrown to the winds. Tumult reigned and men armed with every conceivable weapon flocked to the port side of Hackett's boat.

All the girls, with the exception of Mamie, retreated up the steps to the vicinity of the pilot house. The reckless Irish rider, however, divined at once the necessity of Rushington's presence, and she sprang to her pony, leaped to the saddle, and forced the horse over the uplifted starboard side of the vessel. The gangplank had been displaced by the listing of the craft, owing to the weight on the other side. Mamie's pony did not balk at this jump, for he had made higher leaps in the hurdle races, and he and his fearless rider were soon bounding along the pier and off up the road. By this time the excitement at the river was attracting many townspeople toward the wharf. From one of these hurrying and curious ones Mamie learned the route to the grounds, and her pony fairly flew as he carried her on to give the alarm to Phil.

Meanwhile the battle on the river was raging fast and

furious—the shouts of the fighters ringing out above the clashing of tent pins and the thwack of club striking club or some undefended head. Burt Wister, the tramp performer, the clown Barrows, Dora's brother Elmer, and many more, distinguished themselves in the skirmish, yet the *Queen's* complement of men appeared to be larger than that of Hackett's boat, and for a time it looked ill for Rushington's outfit. But, at the crisis of the set-to, Hackett and his engineer sprang a little surprise on their opponents in the shape of a long hose and a jet of hot water, direct from the boiler. Before this hissing stream the enemy dropped weapons and scudded for cover like so many rats for their holes. Swearing horribly, the skipper of the *River Queen* rang for "full speed ahead," and drew away from the scalding water with a cargo of badly-demoralized roughs.

Then how the cheers went up from Rushington's men! But Grout allowed them little time for exultation, well knowing that the first shift had been due at the grounds long before, and that Phil would be waiting and anxious, if not already on his way back to discover the cause of the delay. So he hurried the men back to the wagons, the gangplanks were replaced, and Eona, Isabel and Dora prepared to mount their horses and leave the boat.

Although beaten at every turn, Bud Christopher and the skipper of the *Queen* were far from cowed. Incensed to a pitch of criminal recklessness, the captain threw the wheel hard over, turned in a circle and came for the stern of Hackett's boat, head-on. The rear hawser, it will be remembered, had been cut, and it was the irate skipper's

intention to bunt into the other steamer's rear, knock her out from the wharf, and, if possible, grind in between.

"Back your engines!" yelled Hackett. "Dash it all! do you intend to run us down?"

"Start your engines and get out of the way, if you don't want to be wrecked!" bellowed the hoarse voice of the other captain. "We're coming up to that wharf if we have to slice you from stern to bow!"

Hackett sprang into his pilot house and quickly reappeared with a long-barreled squirrel gun. Throwing this to his shoulder, he drew a bead on the face of his enemy, leering at him through the open window of the other pilot house.

"Back her!" yelled Hackett; "back that boat of yours or I'll shoot! Quick, or——"

The other skipper dropped out of sight, the wheel flew around, and the *River Queen* yawed frightfully, struck the steamer in front and forced her side away from the wharf. The *Queen*, however, did not wedge her way in between Hackett's boat and the wharf. The releasing of the wheel caused the *Queen* to slew around, and she glanced from the stern of the other craft and pointed for the middle of the river.

But more than enough evil had been wrought by these diabolical tactics. The fair equestriennes, Eona and Isabel, had just ridden over the gangplank. They got safely across before the *Queen* struck; but Dora, who was close behind and hurrying in response to a warning shouted by her brother and Grout, did not fare so well.

The side of the vessel was driven from the wharf, the gangplank slipped off, and Dora and her horse fell with it.

Shouts of horror and wild alarm went up from the onlookers, and, for one awful moment no one seemed able to raise a hand to rescue the girl. But the spell was broken by a rattling patter of hoofs as Rushington dashed up to the brink and drew his sweating horse to a swift stop.

There was no need of words to detail the situation. All too plain it lay before his eyes. In a second he was on the boards of the pier; another second and his hat and coat had been thrown off.

"Courage, Dora!" he cried, looking down into the fair, white face below him. "I'll save you."

Then he leaped outward and downward, plunging into the waters head-first between the girl and the struggling horse.

CHAPTER XLI.

CONCLUSION.

Phil's plunge to Dora's rescue reminded him, as he afterward said, of another time on the lake near Springvale Academy, when a boat in which she and two other girls were rowing was run down and wrecked by a sailing craft. The circumstances were widely different, but the peril in the present instance was none the less.

Our hero, however, acquitted himself as well this time as he did then, although his task was greater, for he had now to keep clear of the horse, which, through some instinct of self-preservation, persisted in swimming toward him and Dora, so that it was difficult to keep out of the animal's way.

Dora was not panic-stricken, as some girls might have been under similar circumstances. One of her shining qualities, which claimed Phil's admiration quite as much as any other, was her coolness and self-possession in times of peril. The "poet of the Norm" was a rare girl in more senses of the word than one, but in none more so than in this.

Throwing one arm about her waist, and easily supporting both himself and her in the water with the strong movements of his other arm and hand, Phil whispered a few encouraging words, and then shouted for a rope. Instantly a line whizzed through the air, and he caught it and held firmly while two of his burly canvasmen

dragged him up to the top of the pier amid the plaudits of the townspeople and circus folk alike.

"Again, Phil!" whispered Dora, as he released her, safe and sound on the planks of the pier. "Is there a fate in this?"

"Call it whatever you like," he whispered, smiling a little as he recalled the incident of the bog and wondered if she gave it rank with this. "I'd like nothing better than to go around playing hero to your heroine, but the blunt truth remains that there were a dozen men here, any one of whom was anxious and eager to do all that I did—and more."

"Yes," she whispered back, "but the blunt truth also remains that you were the only one out of the entire twelve to do it. By the way, look at Isabel! See what a light plays in her eyes. Ah, if glances could kill!"

Eona, Isabel and Mamie, too, had witnessed the rescue, and all three had but one thought, although differently impressed with it. They all knew that events of this kind could not fail to bring the young showman and pretty Dora Warren closer together.

While this was going on, another hawser had been attached to the stern in lieu of the one that had been severed, the boat was warped back into place, the gangway hauled up and put in proper position, and Dora's horse guided down stream by rowboat and led up the shelving bank below the wharf.

"Now, Grout," said the young circus owner, as he stepped briskly aboard, "what has happened? Tell me in as few words as possible."

By this time the last piece of baggage had been taken ashore, the ringmaster had put Rushington in possession of all the facts in connection with the *River Queen* and her passengers.

"Where is the steamer, anyhow?" asked Phil, looking up and down the river. No sign of the boat, or of Saunders' show was anywhere to be seen.

"Hackett says the *Queen* crowded on all steam and went along with the current," said Grout.

"That's where she went," put in Hackett. "Does your combination play any more towns along the river, Mr. Rushington?"

"No, thank Heaven! Why do you ask?"

"Because Saunders' show would probably be ahead of you if you were going down any farther. Are either of you gentlemen going back to the landing with me?"

"Mr. Grout will go," said Phil, "and superintend the loading and unloading of the last load."

"Then I must ask you to step ashore. As you know our time is limited, and this craft will have to do some pretty swift running in order to get back according to schedule."

"You'll make it all O. K.," answered Phil, stepping to the gangplank and joining Dora, who was waiting for him. "Remember, you will have no *River Queen* to pursue you with a rival circus."

Together he and Dora stepped to the pier, the plank was drawn in, the hawsers taken off the piles and Hackett started up stream for the remainder of the Mossman & Rushington show.

So quickly had the laborers and canvasmen worked,

under the skilled superintendence of Walt Arkwright, that the gleam of the tents, with their waving banners, struck on the sight of Phil and Dora as they came within view of the grounds.

"Now, that's something like!" exclaimed the young circus owner, with considerable satisfaction. "If the people of Charlotte ever learn the amount of trouble it has caused us to give them two performances to-day, I think they will appreciate our efforts."

"Have you any idea what will be done with Joseph Q. Saunders and his two men, Phil?" questioned Dora.

"That depends, I suppose, on how badly the mayor's horse was hurt. Personally, I do not know as I can make out a very clear case against any of them. It's all in a business way, you understand," he added, with a laugh, "and competition is always the life of trade."

"What about Neil Dustin, Phil?"

"That's a different proposition. He tried to burn Hackett's boat, and the skipper turned him over to the authorities. Just what will be done with him it is hard to say."

"He'll get his deserts," said Walt. "Don't worry about that."

The day's business at Charlotte proved very good, and so did the business of several days after that.

Now skies were bright, money was rolling in fast, and with so many friends around him, Phil Rushington, the young circus owner, felt very well content.

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